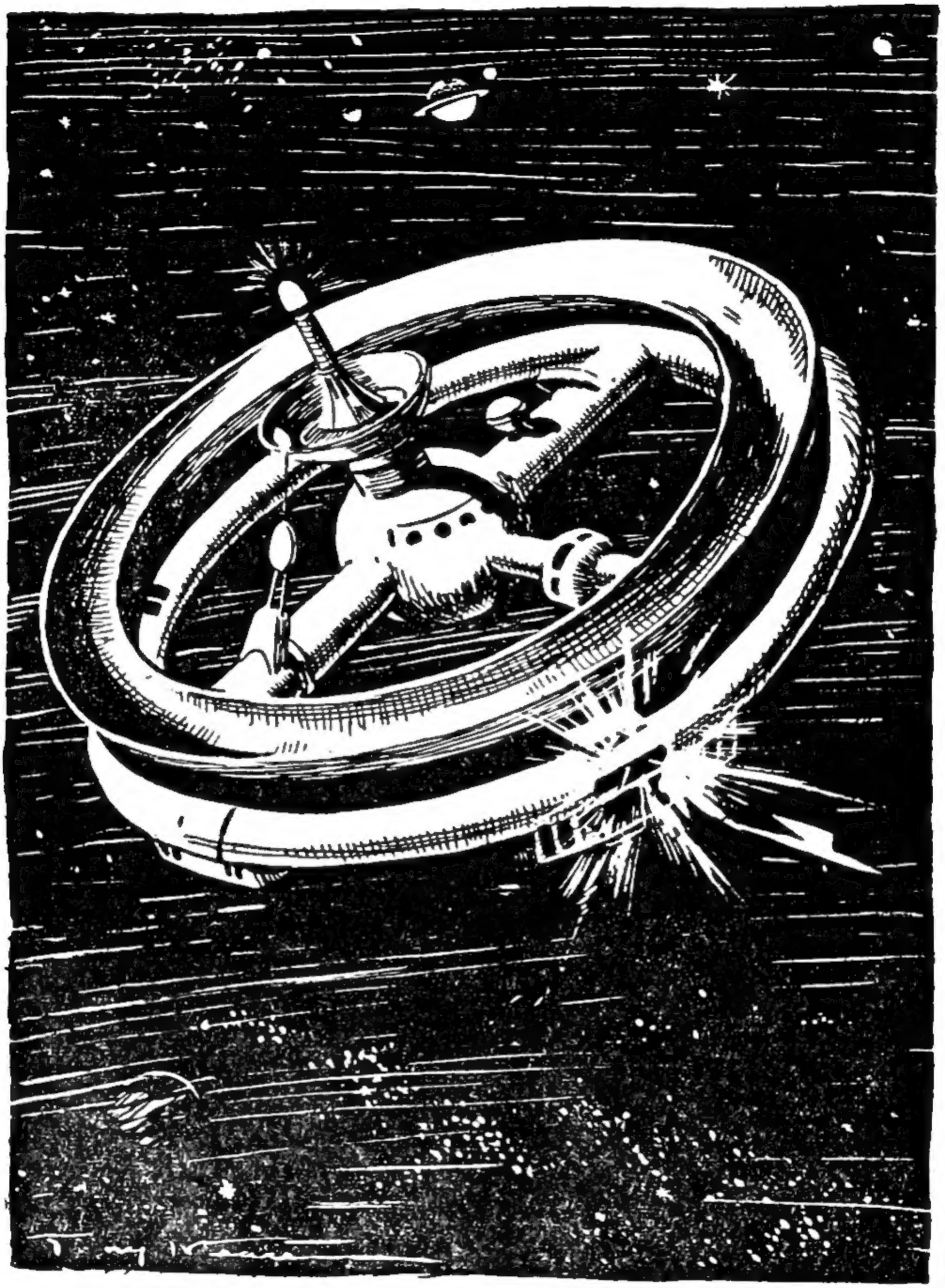
ADVENTURE STORIES

for Boys



Even as he watched it through the telescope, a flash of brilliant light showed that a Space life-boat was being sent to his aid.

(Danger in Space)

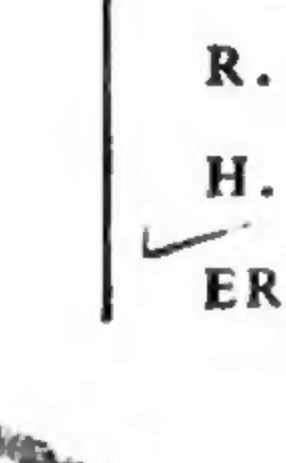
ADVENTURE STORIES

for Boys

The writers include:

T. O. BEACHCROFT
ARTHUR CATHERALL
DENIS CLARK
HYLTON CLEAVER
SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE
I. O. EVANS
CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS
GERALD KERSH
S. MALCOLM KIRK
ERIC LEYLAND
R. J. MCGREGOR
H. G. WELLS
ERIC WILLIAMS

...LS COL...
...FEB 20...



ODHAMS BOOKS LIMITED
LONG ACRE, LONDON

What this book contains

	Page
HOW THE BRIGADIER WON HIS MEDAL *By Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*, illustrated by Sherriffs Brigadier Gerard's most desperate adventure—a tale of the Napoleonic Wars.	7
SMASH AND GRAB *By S. Malcolm Kirk*, illustrated by Edward Osmond Two schoolboys witness a smash-and-grab raid and get on the track of the thieves.	43
THE SAGA OF THE "HUNGRY HEN" *By Denis Clark*, illustrated by Drake Brookshaw An ex-R.A.F. officer meets peril over Africa in his old converted bomber.	65
HITCH-HIKE HOLIDAY *By H. V. Philips*, illustrated by Norman Mansbridge To hitch-hike to Paris with £10 in your pocket would be exciting enough for most boys, but for two English schoolboys it was just the start of a tremendous adventure.	77
DANGER IN SPACE *By I. O. Evans*, illustrated by Tony Weare His job was plotting meteor swarms to keep the spaceways safe for the big interplanetary ships. The story of a collision with an ice meteor.	105
THE TUNNELLERS *By Eric Williams*, illustrated by G. S. Gould The author of *The Wooden Horse*, the most famous war-time escape book, tells an exciting tale of English prisoners escaping from a German prison camp in Poland.	119
IN THE FACE OF CONSIDERABLE HAZARDS *By N. G. Strong*, illustrated by Will Nickless The junior engineer is inspecting the propeller shaft when his ship collides with another vessel and the steel safety door cuts him off from his companions.	135
THROUGH A WINDOW *By H. G. Wells*, illustrated by William Hewison What would you do if you were recovering in a plaster cast from two broken legs and a Malay ran amok with a kris outside your window? The story of the most terrifying minutes in a young man's life.	145

Page

FORGET-ME-NOT 159

By Hylton Cleaver, illustrated by Norman Mansbridge

He had never made his mark; and he was nearing the end of his schooldays. To make the fellows remember him became his obsession. This is the story of how he did it.

THE CASE OF THE UNKNOWN AIRCRAFT 177

By Captain W. E. Johns, illustrated by Leo Newman

That very popular hero of boys' fiction, "Biggles" of the Air Police, solves a mystery in the Scottish highlands.

THE 'PRENTICE DECKIE 197

By Arthur Catherall, illustrated by Stephen Russ

It is difficult to be seasick and heroic at the same time, but the 'prentice deck-hand could do something that none of his seniors could and rose to the occasion.

SECONDS OUT OF THE RING 213

By Eric Leyland, illustrated by Webster Murray

A youthful boxer is convinced that he has killed a man which is very bad for his morale on the eve of the big fight.

IRONGUT AND THE BROWN MOUSE 237

By Gerald Kersh, illustrated by Evelyn Cooke

The story of a terribly tough soldier and his amusing vendetta with a mouse.

A VERY SIMPLE CLUE 245

By R. J. McGregor, illustrated by Fred Stocks May

The story of a couple of boys who do a little detecting on their own and make things difficult for both police and crooks.

LEININGEN VERSUS THE ANTS 269

By Carl Stephenson, illustrated by William Reeves

Old Leiningen thinks that he can fight the soldier ants and save his plantation from their ravages. Some think he is mad. The magnificent story of an epic struggle—man against ants.

THE ERNE FROM THE COAST 301

By T. O. Beachcroft, illustrated by Joan Kiddell-Munro

His own father wouldn't believe him when he said that an eagle had killed the lamb, so the boy went back to the hills and came home with a dead eagle. The story of a terrific fight between boy and bird.

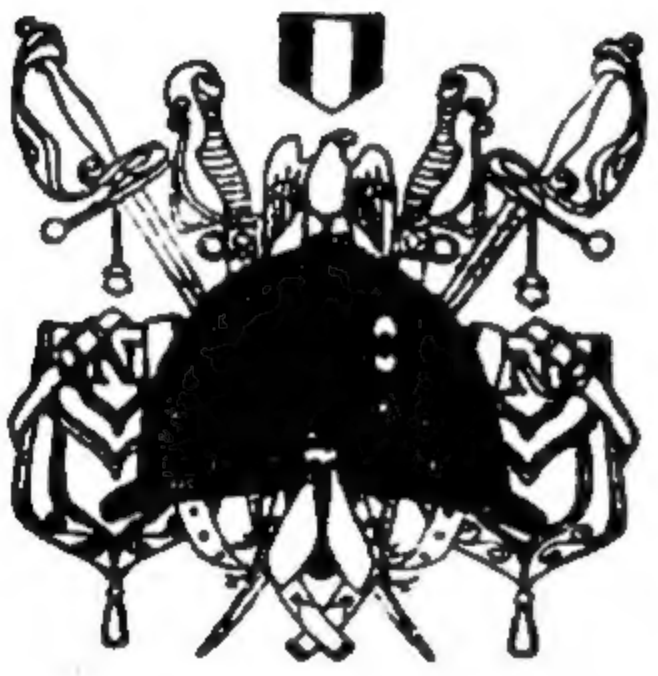
"You have not yet received the cross of honour, Brigadier Gerard?" he asked.

[See page 8

SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

★

How the Brigadier won his medal



THE Duke of Tarentum, or Macdonald, as his old comrades prefer to call him, was, as I could perceive, in the vilest of tempers. His grim, Scotch face was like one of those grotesque door-knockers which one sees in the Faubourg St. Germain. We heard afterwards that the Emperor had said in jest that he would have sent him against Wellington in the south, but that he was afraid to trust him within the sound of the pipes. Major Charpentier and I could plainly see that he was smouldering with anger.

" Brigadier Gerard of the Hussars," said he, with the air of the corporal with the recruit.

I saluted.

"Major Charpentier of the Horse Grenadiers."

My companion answered to his name.

"The Emperor has a mission for you."

Without more ado he flung open the door and announced us.

I have seen Napoleon ten times on horseback to once on foot, and I think that he does wisely to show himself to the troops in this fashion, for he cuts a very good figure in the

saddle. As we saw him now he was the shortest man out of six by a good hand's breadth, and yet I am no very big man myself, though I ride quite heavy enough for a hussar. It is evident, too, that his body is too long for his legs. With his big, round head, his curved shoulders, and his clean-shaven face, he is more like a Professor at the Sorbonne than the first soldier in France. Every man to his taste, but it seems to me that if I could clap a pair of fine light cavalry whiskers, like my own, on to him, it would do him no harm. He has a firm mouth, however, and his eyes are remarkable. I have seen them once turned on me in anger, and I had rather ride at a square on a spent horse than face them again. I am not a man who is easily daunted, either.

He was standing at the side of the room, away from the window, looking up at a great map of the country which was hung upon the wall. Berthier stood beside him, trying to look wise, and just as we entered Napoleon snatched his sword impatiently from him and pointed with it on the map. He was talking fast and low, but I heard him say, "The valley of the Meuse," and twice he repeated: "Berlin." As we entered, his aide-de-camp advanced to us, but the Emperor stopped him and beckoned us to his side.

"You have not yet received the cross of honour, Brigadier Gerard?" he asked.

I replied that I had not, and was about to add that it was not for the want of having deserved it, when he cut me short in his decided fashion.

"And you, Major?" he asked.

"No, sire."

"Then you shall both have your opportunity now."

He led us to the great map upon the wall and placed the tip of Berthier's sword on Rheims.

"I will be frank with you, gentlemen, as with two comrades. You have both been with me since Marengo, I believe?" He had a strangely pleasant smile, which used to light up his pale face with a kind of cold sunshine. "Here at Rheims are our present headquarters on this the fourteenth

of March. Very good. Here is Paris, distant by road a good twenty-five leagues. Blucher lies to the north, Schwarzenberg to the south." He prodded at the map with the sword as he spoke.

"Now," said he, "the farther into the country these people march, the more completely I shall crush them. They are about to advance upon Paris. Very good. Let them do so. My brother, the King of Spain, will be there with a hundred thousand men. It is to him that I send you. You will hand him this letter, a copy of which I confide to each of you. It is to tell him that I am coming at once, in two days' time, with every man and horse and gun to his relief. I must give them forty-eight hours to recover. Then straight to Paris! You understand me, gentlemen?"

Ah, if I could tell you the glow of pride which it gave me to be taken into the great man's confidence in this way. As he handed our letters to us I clicked my spurs and threw out my chest, smiling and nodding to let him know that I saw what he would be after. He smiled also, and rested his hand for a moment upon the cape of my dolman. I would have given half my arrears of pay if my mother could have seen me at that instant.

"I will show you your route," said he, turning back to the map. "Your orders are to ride together as far as Bazoches. You will then separate, the one making for Paris by Oulchy and Neuilly, and the other to the north by Braine, Soissons, and Senlis. Have you anything to say, Brigadier Gerard?"

I am a rough soldier, but I have words and ideas. I had begun to speak about glory and the peril of France when he cut me short.

"And you, Major Charpentier?"

"If we find our route unsafe, are we at liberty to choose another?" said he.

"Soldiers do not choose, they obey." He inclined his head to show that we were dismissed, and turned round to Berthier. I do not know what he said, but I heard them both laughing.

Well, as you may think, we lost little time in getting upon

our way. In half an hour we were riding down the High Street of Rheims, and it struck twelve o'clock as we passed the Cathedral. I had my little grey mare, Violette, the one which Sebastiani had wished to buy after Dresden. It is the fastest horse in the six brigades of light cavalry, and was only beaten by the Duke of Rovigo's racer from England. As to Charpentier, he had the kind of horse which a horse grenadier or a cuirassier would be likely to ride; a back like a bedstead, you understand, and legs like the posts. He is a hulking fellow himself, so that they looked a singular pair. And yet in his insane conceit he ogled the girls as they waved their handkerchiefs to me from the windows, and he twirled his ugly red moustache up into his eyes, just as if it were to him that their attention was addressed.

When we came out of the town we passed through the French camp, and then across the battlefield of yesterday, which was still covered both by our own poor fellows and by the Russians. But of the two the camp was the sadder sight. Our army was thawing away. The Guards were all right, though the young guard was full of conscripts. The artillery and the heavy cavalry were also good if there were more of them, but the infantry privates with their under-officers looked like schoolboys with their masters. And we had no reserves. When one considered that there were 80,000 Prussians to the north and 150,000 Russians and Austrians to the south, it might make even the bravest man grave.

For my own part, I confess that I shed a tear until the thought came that the Emperor was still with us, and that on that very morning he had placed his hand upon my dolman and had promised me a medal of honour. This set me singing, and I spurred Violette on, until Charpentier had to beg me to have mercy on his great, snorting, panting camel. The road was beaten into paste and rutted two feet deep by the artillery, so that he was right in saying that it was not the place for a gallop.

I have never been very friendly with this Charpentier; and now for twenty miles of the way I could not draw a word

He ogled the girls as they waved their handkerchiefs.

from him. He rode with his brows puckered and his chin upon his breast, like a man who is heavy with thought. More than once I asked him what was on his mind, thinking that, perhaps, with my quicker intelligence I might set the matter straight. His answer always was that it was his mission of which he was thinking, which surprised me, because, although I had never thought much of his intelligence, still it seemed to me to be impossible that anyone could be puzzled by so simple and soldierly a task.

Well, we came at last to Bazoches, where he was to take the southern road and I the northern. He half turned in his saddle before he left me, and he looked at me with a singular expression of inquiry in his face.

"What do you make of it, Brigadier?" he asked.

"Of what?"

"Of our mission."

"Surely it is plain enough."

"You think so? Why should the Emperor tell us his plans?"

"Because he recognized our intelligence."

My companion laughed in a manner which I found annoying.

"May I ask what you intend to do if you find these villages full of Prussians?" he asked.

"I shall obey my orders."

"But you will be killed."

"Very possibly."

He laughed again, and so offensively that I clapped my hand to my sword. But before I could tell him what I thought of his stupidity and rudeness he had wheeled his horse, and was lumbering away down the other road. I saw his big fur cap vanish over the brow of the hill, and then I rode upon my way, wondering at his conduct. From time to time I put my hand to the breast of my tunic and felt the paper crackle

He laughed so offensively that I clapped my hand to my sword.

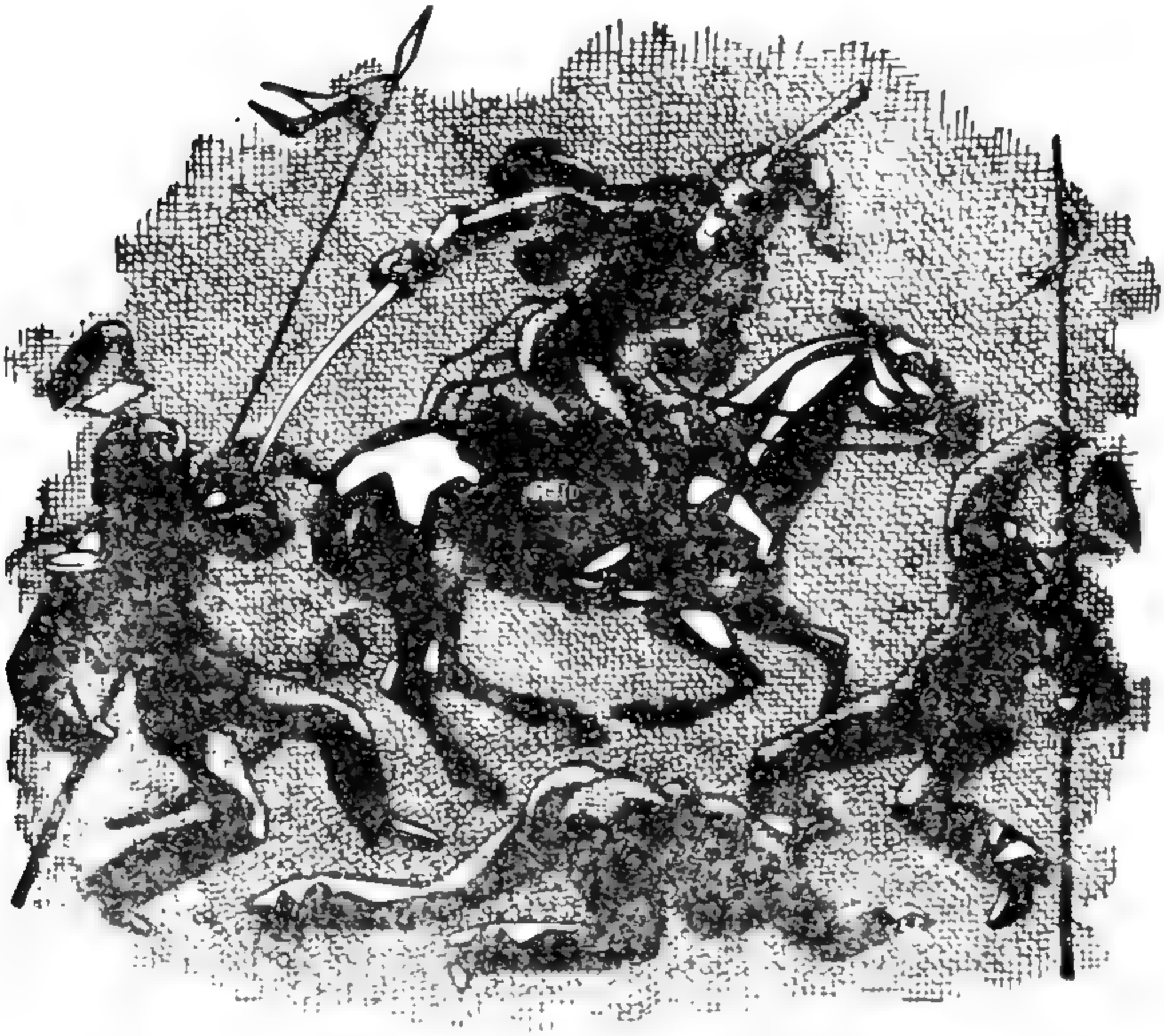
beneath my fingers. Ah, my precious paper, which should be turned into the little silver medal for which I had yearned so long. All the way from Braine to Sermoise I was thinking of what my mother would say when she saw it.

I stopped to give Violette a meal at a wayside *auberge* on the side of a hill not far from Soissons—a place surrounded by old oaks, and with so many crows that one could scarce hear one's own voice. It was from the innkeeper that I learned that Marmont had fallen back two days before, and that the Prussians were over the Aisne. An hour later, in the fading light, I saw two of their vedettes upon the hill to the right, and then, as darkness gathered, the heavens to the north were all glimmering from the lights of a bivouac.

When I heard that Blucher had been there for two days, I was much surprised that the Emperor should not have known that the country through which he had ordered me to carry my precious letter was already occupied by the enemy. Still, I thought of the tone of his voice when he said to Charpentier that a soldier must not choose, but must obey. I should follow the route he had laid down for me as long as Violette could move a hoof or I a finger upon her bridle. All the way from Sermoise to Soissons, where the road dips up and down, curving among fir woods, I kept my pistol ready and my sword-belt braced, pushing on swiftly where the path was straight, and then coming slowly round the corners in the way we learned in Spain.

When I came to the farmhouse which lies to the right of the road just after you cross the wooden bridge over the Crise, near where the great statue of the Virgin stands, a woman cried to me from the field, saying that the Prussians were in Soissons. A small party of their lancers, she said, had come in that very afternoon, and a whole division was expected before midnight. I did not wait to hear the end of her tale, but clapped spurs into Violette, and in five minutes was galloping her into the town.

Three Uhlans were at the mouth of the main street, their horses tethered, and they gossiping together, each with a



I flew through a stream of them.

pipe as long as my sabre. I saw them well in the light of an open door, but of me they could have seen only the flash of Violette's grey side and the black flutter of my cloak. A moment later I flew through a stream of them rushing from an open gateway. Violette's shoulder sent one of them reeling, and I stabbed at another but missed him. Pang, pang, went two carbines, but I had flown round the curve of the street, and never so much as heard the hiss of the balls. Ah, we were great, both Violette and I. She lay down to it like a coursed hare, the fire flying from her hoofs. I stood in my stirrups and brandished my sword. Someone sprang for my bridle. I sliced him through the arm, and I heard him howling

behind me. Two horsemen closed upon me. I cut one down and outpaced the other. A minute later I was clear of the town, and flying down a broad white road with the black poplars on either side. For a time I heard the rattle of hoofs behind me, but they died and died until I could not tell them from the throbbing of my own heart. Soon I pulled up and listened, but all was silent. They had given up the chase.

Well, the first thing that I did was to dismount and to lead my mare into a small wood through which a stream ran. There I watered her and rubbed her down, giving her two pieces of sugar soaked in cognac from my flask. She was spent from the sharp chase, but it was wonderful to see how she came round with a half-hour's rest. When my thighs closed upon her again, I could tell by the spring and the swing of her that it would not be her fault if I did not win my way safe to Paris.

I must have been well within the enemy's lines now, for I heard a number of them shouting one of their rough drinking songs out of a house by the roadside, and I went round by the fields to avoid it. At another time two men came out into the moonlight (for by this time it was a cloudless night) and shouted something in German, but I galloped on without heeding them, and they were afraid to fire, for their own hussars are dressed exactly as I was. It is best to take no notice at these times, and then they put you down as a deaf man.

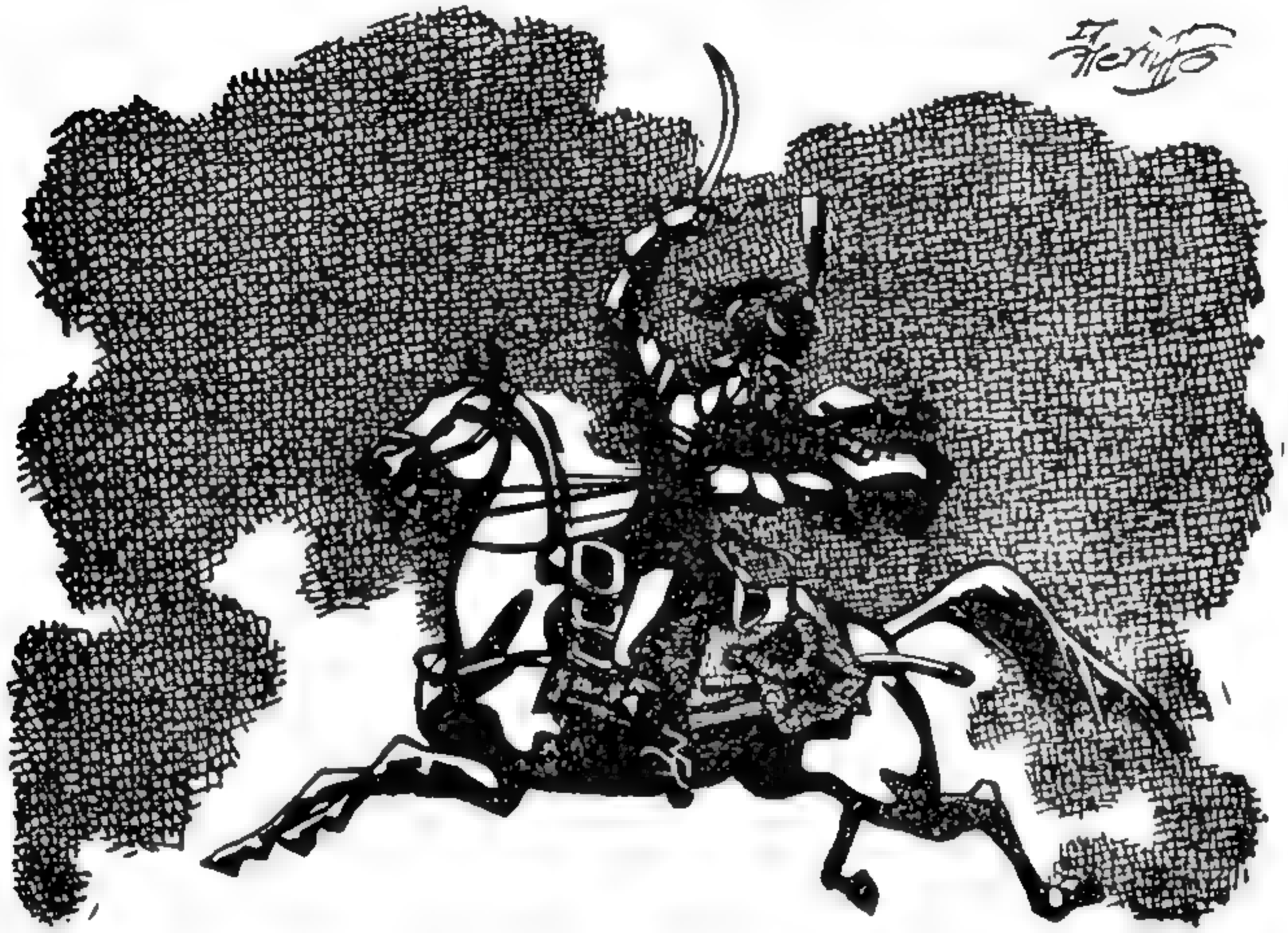
It was a lovely moon, and every tree threw a black bar across the road. I could see the countryside just as if it were daytime, and very peaceful it looked, save that there was a great fire raging somewhere in the north. In the silence of the night-time, and with the knowledge that danger was in front and behind me, the sight of that great distant fire was very striking and awesome. But I am not easily clouded, for I have seen too many singular things, so I hummed a tune between my teeth and thought of little Lisette, whom I might see in Paris. My mind was full of her when, trotting round a corner, I came straight upon half a dozen German

dragoons, who were sitting round a brushwood fire by the roadside.

I am an excellent soldier. I do not say this because I am prejudiced in my own favour, but because I really am so. I can weigh every chance in a moment, and decide with as much certainty as though I had brooded for a week. Now I saw like a flash that, come what might, I should be chased, and on a horse which had already done a long twelve leagues. But it was better to be chased onwards than to be chased back. On this moonlit night, with fresh horses behind me, I must take my risk in either case; but if I were to shake them off, I preferred that it should be near Senlis than near Soissons.

All this flashed on me as if by instinct, you understand. My eyes had hardly rested on the bearded faces under the brass helmets before my rowels had touched Violette, and she was off with a rattle like a *pas-de-charge*. Oh, the shouting and rushing and stamping from behind us! Three of them fired and three swung themselves on to their horses. A bullet rapped on the crupper of my saddle with a noise like a stick on a door. Violette sprang madly forward, and I thought she had been wounded, but it was only a graze above the near fore-fetlock. Ah, the dear little mare, how I loved her when I felt her settle down into that long, easy gallop of hers, her hoofs going like a Spanish girl's castanets. I could not hold myself. I turned on my saddle and shouted and raved, "*Vive l'Empereur!*" I screamed and laughed at the gust of oaths that came back to me.

But it was not over yet. If she had been fresh she might have gained a mile in five. Now she could only hold her own with a very little over. There was one of them, a young boy of an officer, who was better mounted than the others. He drew ahead with every stride. Two hundred yards behind him were two troopers, but I saw every time that I glanced round that the distance between them was increasing. The other three, who had waited to shoot, were a long way in the rear.



"Vive l'Empereur!" *I screamed.*

The officer's mount was a bay—a fine horse, though not to be spoken of with Violette; yet it was a powerful brute, and it seemed to me that in a few miles its freshness might tell. I waited until the lad was a long way in front of his comrades, and then I eased my mare down a little—a very, very little, so that he might think he was really catching me. When he came within pistol-shot of me, I drew and cocked my own pistol, and laid my chin upon my shoulder to see what he would do. He did not offer to fire, and I soon discerned the cause. The silly boy had taken his pistols from his holsters when he had camped for the night. He wagged his sword at me now and roared some threat or other. He did not seem to understand that he was at my mercy. I eased Violette down until there was not the length of a long lance between the grey tail and the bay muzzle.

"*Rendez-vous!*" he yelled.

"I must compliment monsieur upon his French," said I, resting the barrel of my pistol upon my bridle-arm, which I

I put my ball through his horse's shoulder.

have always found best when shooting from the saddle. I aimed at his face, and could see, even in the moonlight, how white he grew when he understood that it was all up with him. But even as my finger pressed the trigger I thought of his mother, and I put my ball through his horse's shoulder. I fear he hurt himself in the fall, for it was a fearful crash, but I had my letter to think of, so I stretched the mare into a gallop once more.

But they were not so easily shaken off, these brigands. The two troopers thought no more of their young officer than if he had been a recruit thrown in the riding-school. They left him to the others and thundered on after me. I had pulled up on the brow of a hill, thinking that I had heard the last of them; but, my faith, I soon saw there was no time for loitering, so away we went, the mare tossing her head and I my shako, to show what we thought of two dragoons who tried to catch a hussar. But at this moment, even while I laughed at the thought, my heart stood still within me, for

there at the end of the long white road was a black patch of cavalry waiting to receive me. To a young soldier it might have seemed the shadow of the trees, but to me it was a troop of hussars, and, turn where I could, death seemed to be waiting for me.

Well, I had the dragoons behind me and the hussars in front. Never since Moscow have I seemed to be in such peril. But for the honour of the brigade I had rather be cut down by a light cavalryman than by a heavy. I never drew bridle, therefore, or hesitated for an instant, but I let Violette have her head. I remember that I tried to pray as I rode, but I am a little out of practice at such things, and the only words I could remember were the prayer for fine weather which we used at the school on the evening before holidays. Even this seemed better than nothing, and I was pattering it out, when suddenly I heard French voices in front of me. Ah, *mon Dieu*, but the joy went through my heart like a musket-ball.

At the head of the troop was old Bouvet.

They were ours—our own dear little rascals from the corps of Marmont. Round whisked my two dragoons and galloped for their lives, with the moon gleaming on their brass helmets, while I trotted up to my friends with no undue haste, for I would have them understand that though a hussar may fly, it is not in his nature to fly very fast. Yet I fear that Violette's heaving flanks and foam-spattered muzzle gave the lie to my careless bearing.

Who should be at the head of the troop but old Bouvet, whom I saved at Leipzig! When he saw me his little pink eyes filled with tears, and, indeed, I could not but shed a few myself at the sight of his joy. I told him of my mission, but he laughed when I said that I must pass through Senlis.

"The enemy is there," said he. "You cannot go."

"I prefer to go where the enemy is," I answered.

"But why not go straight to Paris with your dispatch? Why should you choose to pass through the one place where you are almost sure to be taken or killed?"

"A soldier does not choose—he obeys," said I, just as I had heard Napoleon say it.

Old Bouvet laughed in his wheezy way, until I had to give my moustachios a twirl and look him up and down in a manner which brought him to reason.

"Well," said he, "you had best come along with us, for we are all bound for Senlis. Our orders are to reconnoitre the place. A squadron of Poniatowski's Polish Lancers are in front of us. If you must ride through it, it is possible that we may be able to go with you."

So away we went, jingling and clanking through the quiet night until we came up with the Poles—fine old soldiers all of them, though a trifle heavy for their horses. It was a treat to see them, for they could not have carried themselves better if they had belonged to my own brigade. We rode together, until in the early morning we saw the lights of Senlis. A peasant was coming along with a cart, and from him we learned how things were going there.

His information was certain, for his brother was the

We rode into the town like a torrent.

Mayor's coachman, and he had spoken with him late the night before. There was a single squadron of Cossacks—or a *polk*, as they call it in their frightful language—quartered upon the Mayor's house, which stands at the corner of the market-place, and is the largest building in the town. A whole division of Prussian infantry was encamped in the woods to the north, but only the Cossacks were in Senlis. Ah, what a chance to avenge ourselves upon these barbarians, whose cruelty to our poor countryfolk was the talk at every camp-fire.

We were into the town like a torrent, hacked down the vedettes, rode over the guard, and were smashing in the doors of the Mayor's house before they understood that there

was a Frenchman within twenty miles of them. We saw horrid heads at the windows—heads bearded to the temples, with tangled hair and sheepskin caps, and silly, gaping mouths. "*Hourra! Hourra!*" they shrieked, and fired with their carbines, but our fellows were into the house and at their throats before they had wiped the sleep out of their eyes. It was dreadful to see how the Poles flung themselves upon them, like starving wolves upon a herd of fat bucks—for, as you know, the Poles have a blood feud against the Cossacks. The most were killed in the upper rooms, whither they had fled for shelter, and the blood was pouring down into the hall like rain from a roof. They are terrible soldiers, these Poles, though I think they are a trifle heavy for their horses. Man for man, they are as big as Kellerman's cuirassiers. Their equipment is, of course, much lighter, since they are without the cuirass, back-plate, and helmet.

Well, it was at this point that I made an error—a very serious error, it must be admitted. Up to this moment I had carried out my mission in a manner which only my modesty prevents me from describing as remarkable. But now I did that which an official would condemn and a soldier excuse.

There is no doubt that the mare was spent, but still it is true that I might have galloped on through Senlis and reached the country, where I should have had no enemy between me and Paris. But what hussar can ride past a fight and never draw rein? It is to ask too much of him. Besides, I thought that if Violette had an hour of rest I might have three hours the better at the other end. Then on the top of it came those heads at the windows, with their sheepskin hats and their barbarous cries. I sprang from my saddle, threw Violette's bridle over a rail-post, and ran into the house with the rest. It is true that I was too late to be of service, and that I was nearly wounded by a lance-thrust from one of these dying savages. Still, it is a pity to miss even the smallest affair, for one never knows what opportunity for advancement may present itself. I have seen more soldierly work in

outpost skirmishes and little gallop-and-hack affairs of the kind than in any of the Emperor's big battles.

When the house was cleared I took a bucket of water out for Violette, and our peasant guide showed me where the good Mayor kept his fodder. My faith, but the little sweetheart was ready for it. Then I sponged down her legs, and leaving her still tethered I went back into the house to find a mouthful for myself, so that I should not need to halt again until I was in Paris.

And now I come to the part of my story which may seem singular to you, although I could tell you at least ten things every bit as queer which have happened to me in my lifetime. You can understand that, to a man who spends his life in scouting and vedette duties on the bloody ground which lies between two great armies, there are many chances of strange experiences. I'll tell you, however, exactly what occurred.

Old Bouvet was waiting in the passage when I entered, and he asked me whether we might not crack a bottle of wine together. "My faith, we must not be long," said he. "There are ten thousand of Theilmann's Prussians in the woods up yonder."

"Where is the wine?" I asked.

"Ah, you may trust two hussars to find where the wine is," said he, and taking a candle in his hand, he led the way down the stone stairs into the kitchen.

When we got there we found another door, which opened on to a winding stair with the cellar at the bottom. The Cossacks had been there before us, as was easily seen by the broken bottles littered all over it. However, the Mayor was a *bon-vivant*, and I do not wish to have a better set of bins to pick from. Chambertin, Graves, Alicant, white wine and red, sparkling and still, they lay in pyramids peeping coyly out of sawdust. Old Bouvet stood with his candle looking here and peeping there, purring in his throat like a cat before a milk-pail. He had picked upon a burgundy at last, and had his hand outstretched to the bottle when there came a roar of musketry from above us, a rush of feet, and such a yelping

He flashed out his sword and away he clattered up the stone steps, his spurs clinking as he ran.

and screaming as I have never listened to. The Prussians were upon us!

Bouvet is a brave man: I will say that for him. He flashed out his sword and away he clattered up the stone steps, his spurs clinking as he ran. I followed him, but just as we came out into the kitchen passage a tremendous shout told us that the house had been recaptured.

"It is all over," I cried, grasping at Bouvet's sleeve.

"There is one more to die," he shouted, and away he went like a madman up the second stair. In effect, I should have gone to my death also had I been in his place, for he had done very wrong in not throwing out his scouts to warn him if the Germans advanced upon him. For an instant I was about to rush up with him, and then I bethought myself that, after all, I had my own mission to think of, and that if I were taken the important letter of the Emperor would be sacrificed.

I let Bouvet die alone, therefore, and I went down into the cellar again, closing the door behind me.

Well, it was not a very rosy prospect down there either. Bouvet had dropped the candle when the alarm came, and I, pawing about in the darkness, could find nothing but broken bottles. At last I came upon the candle, which had rolled under the curve of a cask, but, try as I would with my tinder-box, I could not light it. The reason was that the wick had been wet in a puddle of wine, so, suspecting that this might be the case, I cut the end off with my sword. Then I found that it lighted easily enough. But what to do I could not imagine. The scoundrels upstairs were shouting themselves hoarse, several hundred of them from the sound, and it was clear that some of them would soon want to moisten their throats. There would be an end to a dashing soldier, and of the mission and of the medal. I thought of my mother and I thought of the Emperor. It made me weep to think that the one would lose so excellent a son and the other the best light cavalry officer he ever had since Lasalle's time. But presently I dashed the tears from my eyes. 'Courage!' I cried, striking myself upon the chest. 'Courage, my brave boy! Is it possible that one who has come safely from Moscow without so much as a frostbite will die in a French wine-cellar?' At the thought I was up on my feet and clutching at the letter in my tunic, for the crackle of it gave me courage.

My first plan was to set fire to the house, in the hope of escaping in the confusion. My second to get into an empty wine-cask. I was looking round to see if I could find one, when suddenly, in the corner, I espied a little low door, painted of the same grey colour as the wall, so that it was only a man with quick sight who would have noticed it. I pushed against it, and at first I imagined that it was locked. Presently, however, it gave a little, and then I understood that it was held by the pressure of something on the other side. I put my feet against a hogshead of wine, and I gave such a push that the door flew open and I came down with a crash upon my back, the candle flying out of my hands, so

that I found myself in darkness once more. I picked myself up and stared through the black archway into the gloom beyond.

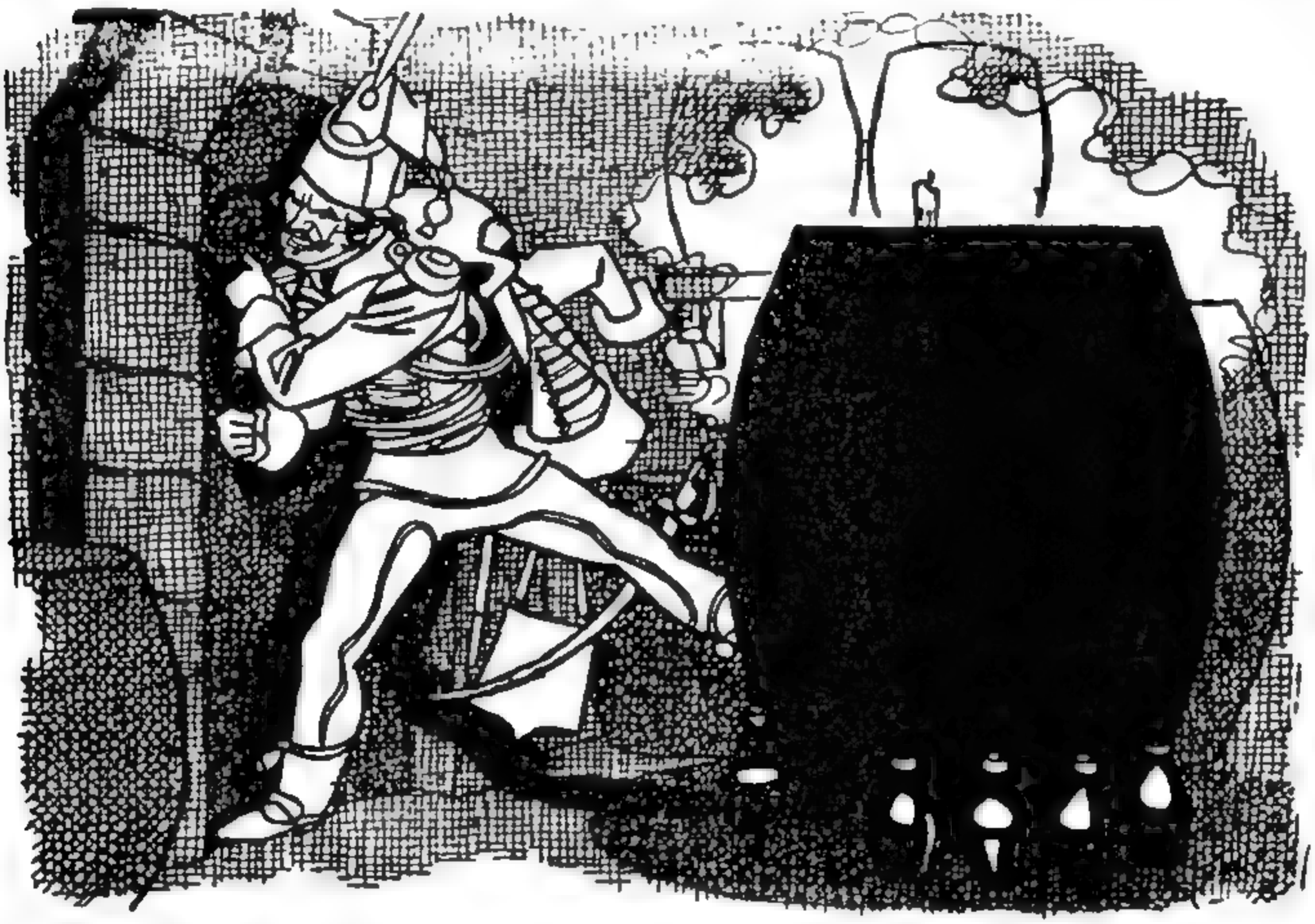
There was a slight ray of light coming from some slit or grating. The dawn had broken outside, and I could dimly see the long curving sides of several huge casks, which made me think that perhaps this was where the Mayor kept his reserves of wine while they were maturing. At any rate, it seemed to be a safer hiding-place than the outer cellar, so gathering up my candle, I was just closing the door behind me, when I suddenly saw something which filled me with amazement, and even, I confess, with the smallest little touch of fear.

I have said that at the farther end of the cellar there was a dim grey fan of light striking downwards from somewhere near the roof. Well, as I peered through the darkness, I suddenly saw a great, tall man skip into this belt of daylight, and then out again into the darkness at the farther end. My word, I gave such a start that my shako nearly broke its chin-strap! It was only a glance, but, none the less, I had time to see that the fellow had a hairy Cossack cap on his head, and that he was a great, long-legged, broad-shouldered brigand, with a sabre at his waist. My faith, even Etienne Gerard was a little staggered at being left alone with such a creature in the dark.

But only for a moment. 'Courage!' I thought. 'Am I not a hussar, a brigadier, too, at the age of thirty-one, and the chosen messenger of the Emperor?' After all, this skulker had more cause to be afraid of me than I of him. And then suddenly I understood that he was afraid—horribly afraid. I could read it from his quick step and his bent shoulders as he ran among the barrels, like a rat making for its hole. And, of course, it must have been he who had held the door against me, and not some packing-case or wine-cask as I had imagined. He was the pursued then, and I the pursuer. Aha, I felt my whiskers bristle as I advanced upon him through the darkness! He would find that he had no chicken

to deal with, this robber from the north. For the moment I was magnificent

At first I had feared to light my candle lest I should make a mark of myself, but now, after cracking my shin over a box, and catching my spurs in some canvas, I thought the bolder course the wiser. I lit it, therefore, and then I advanced with long strides, my sword in my hand. "Come out, you



I pushed against the door.

rascal!" I cried. "Nothing can save you. You will at last meet with your deserts."

I held my candle high, and presently I caught a glimpse of the man's head staring at me over a barrel. He had a gold chevron on his black cap, and the expression of his face told me in an instant that he was an officer and a man of refinement.

"Monsieur," he cried, in excellent French, "I surrender myself on a promise of quarter. But if I do not have your promise, I will then sell my life as dearly as I can."

"Sir," said I, "a Frenchman knows how to treat an unfortunate enemy. Your life is safe." With that he handed his sword over the top of the barrel, and I bowed with the candle on my heart. "Whom have I the honour of capturing?"

"I am the Count Boutkine, of the Emperor's own Don Cossacks," said he. "I came out with my troop to reconnoitre Senlis, and as we found no sign of your people we determined to spend the night here."

"And would it be an indiscretion," I asked, "if I were to inquire how you came into the back cellar?"

"Nothing more simple," said he. "It was our intention to start at early dawn. Feeling chilled after dressing, I thought that a cup of wine would do me no harm, so I came down

"Come out, you rascal!" I cried.

to see what I could find. As I was rummaging about, the house was suddenly carried by assault so rapidly that by the time I had climbed the stairs it was all over. It only remained for me to save myself, so I came down here and hid myself in the back cellar, where you have found me."

I thought of how old Bouvet had behaved under the same conditions, and the tears sprang to my eyes as I contemplated the glory of France. Then I had to consider what I should do next. It was clear that this Russian Count, being in the back cellar while we were in the front one, had not heard the sounds which would have told him that the house was once again in the hands of his own allies. If he should once understand this the tables would be turned, and I should be his prisoner instead of he being mine. What was I to do? I was at my wits' end, when suddenly there came to me an idea so brilliant that I could not but be amazed at my own invention.

"Count Boutkine," said I, "I find myself in a most difficult position."

"And why?" he asked.

"Because I have promised you your life."

His jaw dropped a little.

"You would not withdraw your promise?" he cried.

"If the worst comes to the worst I can die in your defence," said I; "but the difficulties are great."

"What is it, then?" he asked.

"I will be frank with you," said I. "You must know that our fellows, and especially the Poles, are so incensed against the Cossacks that the mere sight of the uniform drives them mad. They precipitate themselves instantly upon the wearer and tear him limb from limb. Even their officers cannot restrain them."

The Russian grew pale at my words and the way in which I said them.

"But this is terrible," said he.

"Horrible!" said I. "If we were to go up together at this moment I cannot promise how far I could protect you."

"I am in your hands," he cried. "What would you suggest that we should do? Would it not be best that I should remain here?"

"That worst of all."

"And why?"

"Because our fellows will ransack the house presently, and then you would be cut to pieces. No, no, I must go and break it to them. But even then, when once they see that accursed uniform, I do not know what may happen."

"Should I then take the uniform off?"

"Excellent!" I cried. "Hold, we have it! You will take your uniform off and put on mine. That will make you sacred to every French soldier."

"It is not the French I fear so much as the Poles."

"But my uniform will be a safeguard against either."

"How can I thank you?" he cried. "But you—what are you to wear?"

"I will wear yours."

"And perhaps fall a victim to your generosity?"

"It is my duty to take the risk," I answered; "but I have no fears. I will ascend in your uniform. A hundred swords will be turned upon me. 'Hold!' I will shout, 'I am the Brigadier Gerard!' Then they will see my face. They will know me. And I will tell them about you. Under the shield of these clothes you will be sacred."

His fingers trembled with eagerness as he tore off his tunic. His boots and breeches were much like my own, so there was no need to change them, but I gave him my hussar jacket, my dolman, my shako, my sword-belt, and my sabre-tache, while I took in exchange his high sheepskin cap with the gold chevron, his fur-trimmed coat, and his crooked sword. Be it well understood that in changing the tunics I did not forget to change my thrice-precious letter also from my old one to my new.

"With your leave," said I, "I shall now bind you to a barrel."

He made a great fuss over this, but I have learned in my

soldiering never to throw away chances, and how could I tell that he might not, when my back was turned, see how the matter really stood, and break in upon my plans? He was leaning against a barrel at the time, so I ran six times round it with a rope, and then tied it with a big knot behind. If he wished to come upstairs he would, at least, have to carry a thousand litres of good French wine for a knapsack.

I ran six times round the barrel with a rope and then tied it.

I then shut the door of the back cellar behind me, so that he might not hear what was going forward, and tossing the candle away I ascended the kitchen stair.

There were only about twenty steps, and yet, while I came up them, I seemed to have time to think of everything that I had ever hoped to do. It was the same feeling that I had at Eylau when I lay with my broken leg and saw the horse artillery galloping down upon me. Of course, I knew that if I were taken I should be shot instantly as being disguised within the enemy's lines. Still, it was a glorious death—in the direct service of the Emperor—and I reflected that there could not be less than five lines, and perhaps seven, in the *Moniteur* about me. Palaret had eight lines, and I am sure that he had not so fine a career.

When I made my way out into the hall, with all the nonchalance in my face and manner that I could assume, the very first thing that I saw was Bouvet's dead body, with his

legs drawn up and a broken sword in his hand. I could see by the black smudge that he had been shot at close quarters. I should have wished to salute as I went by, for he was a gallant man, but I feared lest I should be seen, and so I passed on.

The front of the hall was full of Prussian infantry, who were knocking loopholes in the wall, as though they expected that there might be yet another attack. Their officer, a little man, was running about giving directions. They were all too busy to take much notice of me, but another officer, who was standing by the door with a long pipe in his mouth, strode across and clapped me on the shoulder, pointing to the dead bodies of our poor hussars, and saying something which was meant for a jest, for his long beard opened and showed every fang in his head. I laughed heartily also, and said the only Russian words that I knew. I learned them from little Sophie, at Wilna, and they meant: "If the night is fine we shall meet under the oak tree, but if it rains we shall meet in the byre." It was all the same to this German, however, and I have no doubt that he gave me credit for saying something very witty indeed, for he roared laughing, and slapped me on my shoulder again. I nodded to him and marched out of the hall-door as coolly as if I were the commandant of the garrison.

There were a hundred horses tethered about outside, most of them belonging to the Poles and hussars. Good little Violette was waiting with the others, and she whinnied when she saw me coming towards her. But I would not mount her. No. I was much too cunning for that. On the contrary, I chose the most shaggy little Cossack horse that I could see, and I sprang upon it with as much assurance as though it had belonged to my father before me. It had a great bag of plunder slung over its neck, and this I laid upon Violette's back, and led her along beside me. Never have you seen such a picture of the Cossack returning from the foray. It was superb.

Well, the town was full of Prussians by this time. They

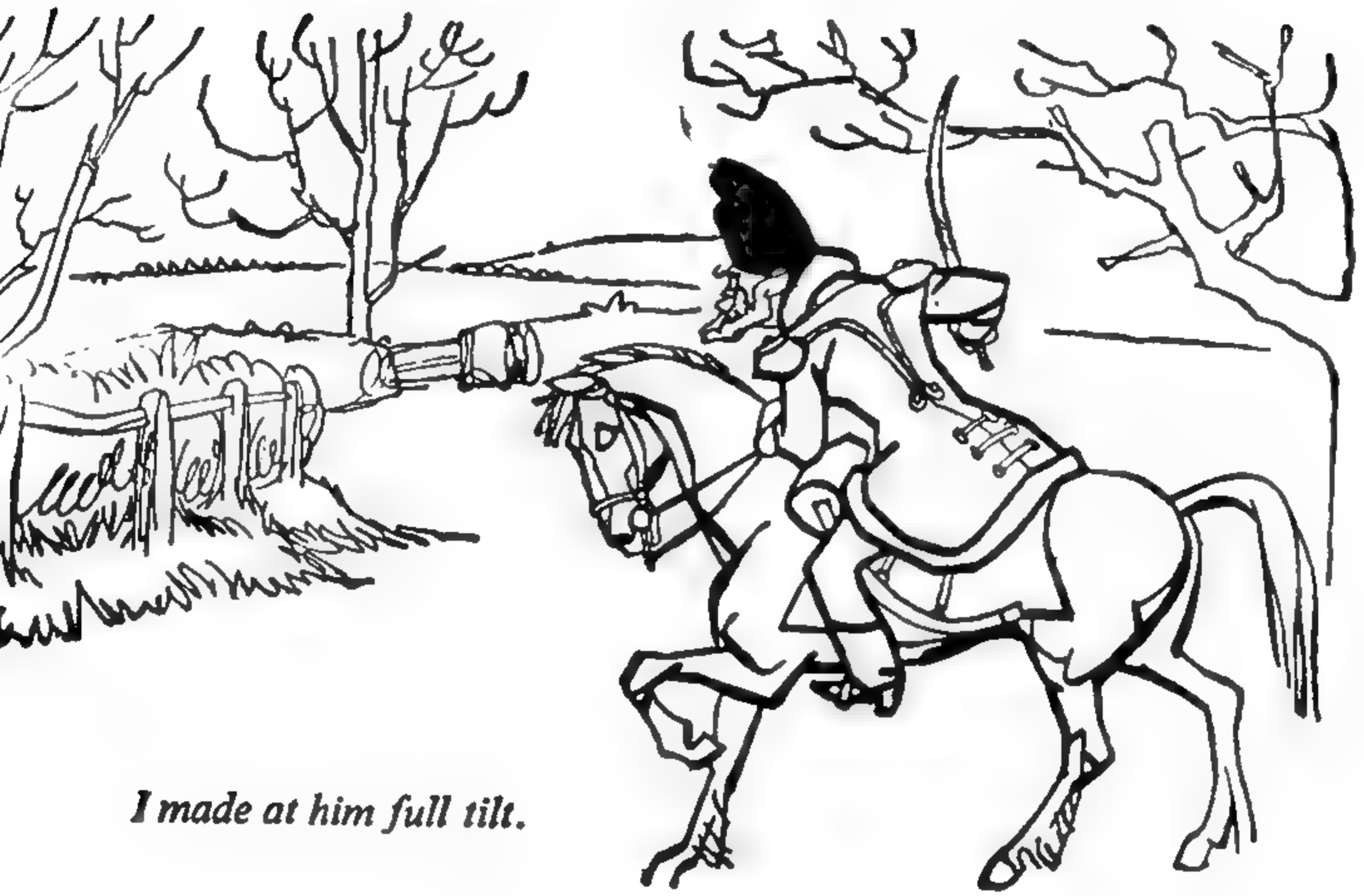
The Prussian officer roared laughing.

lined the side-walks and pointed me out to each other, saying, as I could judge from their gestures, "There goes one of those devils of Cossacks. They are the boys for foraging and plunder."

One or two officers spoke to me with an air of authority, but I shook my head and smiled, and said, "If the night is fine we shall meet under the oak tree, but if it rains we shall meet in the byre," at which they shrugged their shoulders and gave the matter up. In this way I worked along until I was beyond the northern outskirt of the town. I could see in the roadway two lancer vedettes with their black and white pennons, and I knew that when I was once past these I should be a free man once more. I made my pony trot, therefore, Violette rubbing her nose against my knee all the time, and looking up at me to ask how she had deserved that this hairy doormat of a creature should be preferred to her. I was not more than a hundred yards from the Uhlans when,

suddenly, you can imagine my feelings when I saw a real Cossack coming galloping along the road towards me.

Ah, my friend, you who read this, if you have any heart, you will feel for a man like me, who had gone through so many dangers and trials, only at this very last moment to be confronted with one which appeared to put an end to everything. I will confess that for a moment I lost heart, and was inclined to throw myself down in my despair, and to cry out that I had been betrayed. But, no; I was not beaten even now. I opened two buttons of my tunic so that I might get easily at the Emperor's message, for it was my fixed determination when all hope was gone to swallow the letter and then die sword in hand. Then I felt that my little, crooked sword was loose in its sheath, and I trotted on to where the vedettes were waiting. They seemed inclined to stop me, but I pointed to the other Cossack, who was still a couple of hundred yards off, and they, understanding that I merely wished to meet him, let me pass with a salute.



I made at him full tilt.

I dug my spurs into my pony then, for if I were only far enough from the lancers I thought I might manage the Cossack without much difficulty. He was an officer, a large, bearded man, with a gold chevron in his cap, just the same as mine. As I advanced he unconsciously aided me by pulling up his horse, so that I had a fine start of the vedettes. On I came for him, and I could see wonder changing to suspicion in his brown eyes as he looked at me and at my pony, and at my equipment. I do not know what it was that was wrong, but he saw something which was as it should not be. He shouted out a question, and then when I gave no answer he pulled out his sword. I was glad in my heart to see him do so, for I had always rather fight than cut down an unsuspecting enemy. Now I made at him full tilt, and, parrying his cut, I got my point in just under the fourth button of his tunic. Down he went, and the weight of him nearly took me off my horse before I could disengage. I never glanced at him to see if he were living or dead, for I sprang off my

pony and on to Violette, with a shake of my bridle and a kiss of my hand to the two Uhlans behind me. They galloped after me, shouting, but Violette had had her rest, and was just as fresh as when she started. I took the first side road to the west and then the first to the south, which would take me away from the enemy's country. On we went and on, every stride taking me farther from my foes and nearer to my friends. At last, when I reached the end of a long stretch of road, and looking back from it could see no sign of any pursuers, I understood that my troubles were over.

And it gave me a glow of happiness, as I rode, to think that I had done to the letter what the Emperor had ordered. What would he say when he saw me? What could he say which would do justice to the incredible way in which I had risen above every danger? He had ordered me to go through Sermoise, Soissons, and Senlis, little dreaming that they were all three occupied by the enemy. And yet I had done it. I had borne his letter in safety through each of these towns. Hussars, dragoons, lancers, Cossacks, and infantry—I had run the gauntlet of all of them, and had come out unharmed.

When I had got as far as Dammartin I caught a first glimpse of our own outposts. There was a troop of dragoons in a field, and of course I could see from the horsehair crests that they were French. I galloped towards them in order to ask them if all was safe between here and Paris, and as I rode I felt such a pride at having won my way back to my friends again, that I could not refrain from waving my sword in the air.

At this a young officer galloped out from among the dragoons, also brandishing his sword, and it warmed my heart to think that he should come riding with such ardour and enthusiasm to greet me. I made Violette caracole, and as we came together I brandished my sword more gallantly than ever, but you can imagine my feelings when he suddenly made a cut at me which would certainly have taken my head off if I had not fallen forward with my nose in Violette's mane. My faith, it whistled just over my cap like an east

wind. Of course, it came from this accursed Cossack uniform which, in my excitement, I had forgotten all about, and this young dragoon had imagined that I was some Russian champion who was challenging the French cavalry. My word, he was a frightened man when he understood how near he had been to killing the celebrated Brigadier Gerard.

Well, the road was clear, and about three o'clock in the afternoon I was at St. Denis, though it took me a long two hours to get from there to Paris, for the road was blocked with commissariat waggons and guns of the artillery reserve, which was going north to Marmont and Mortier. You cannot conceive the excitement which my appearance in such a costume made in Paris, and when I came to the Rue de Rivoli I should think I had a quarter of a mile of folk riding or running behind me. Word had got about from the dragoons (two of whom had come with me), and everybody knew about my adventures and how I had come by my uniform. It was a triumph—men shouting and women waving their handkerchiefs and blowing kisses from the windows.

Although I am a man singularly free from conceit, still I must confess that, on this one occasion, I could not restrain myself from showing that this reception gratified me. The Russian's coat had hung very loose upon me, but now I threw out my chest until it was as tight as a sausage-skin. And my little sweetheart of a mare tossed her mane and pawed with her front hoofs, frisking her tail about as though she said, 'We've done it together this time. It is to us that commissions should be intrusted.' When I kissed her between the nostrils as I dismounted at the gate of the Tuileries, there was as much shouting as if a bulletin had been read from the Grand Army.

I was hardly in costume to visit a King; but, after all, if one has a soldierly figure one can do without all that. I was shown up straight away to Joseph, whom I had often seen in Spain. He seemed as stout, as quiet, and as amiable as ever. Talleyrand was in the room with him, or I suppose I

should call him the Duke of Benevento, but I confess that I like old names best. He read my letter when Joseph Buonaparte handed it to him, and then he looked at me with the strangest expression in those funny little twinkling eyes of his.

"Were you the only messenger?" he asked.

"There was one other, sir," said I. "Major Charpentier, of the Horse Grenadiers."

"He has not yet arrived," said the King of Spain.

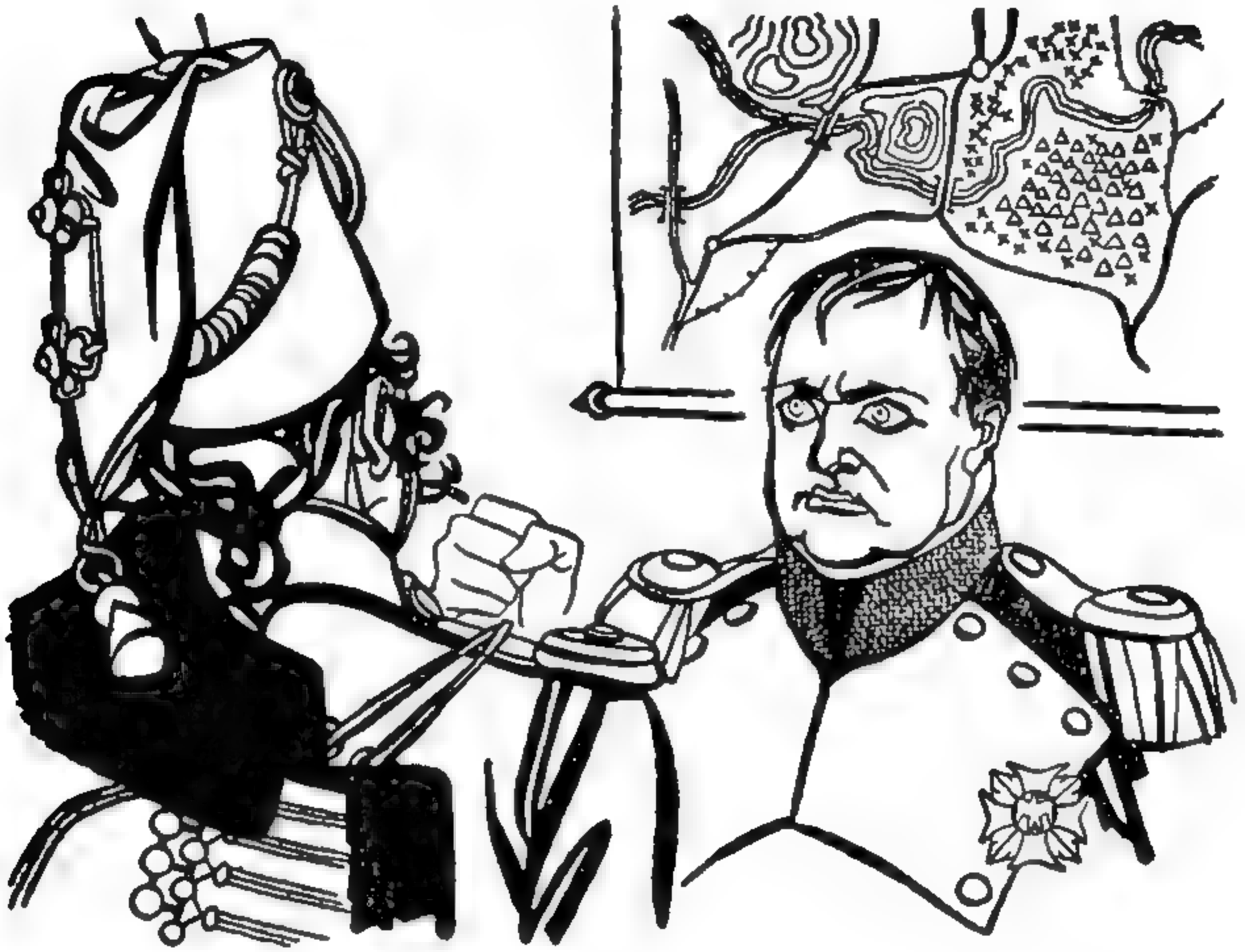
"If you had seen the legs of his horse, sire, you would not wonder at it," I remarked.

"There may be other reasons," said Talleyrand, and he gave that singular smile of his.

Well, they paid me a compliment or two, though they might have said a good deal more and yet have said too little. I bowed myself out, and very glad I was to get away, for I hate a Court as much as I love a camp. Away I went to my old friend Chaubert, in the Rue Miromesnil, and there I got his hussar uniform, which fitted me very well. He and Lisette and I supped together in his rooms, and all my dangers were forgotten. In the morning I found Violette ready for another twenty-league stretch. It was my intention to return instantly to the Emperor's headquarters, for I was, as you may well imagine, impatient to hear his words of praise, and to receive my reward.

I need not say that I rode back by a safe route, for I had seen quite enough of Uhlans and Cossacks. I passed through Meaux and Château Thierry, and so in the evening I arrived at Rheims, where Napoleon was still lying. The bodies of our fellows and of St. Prest's Russians had all been buried, and I could see changes in the camp also. The soldiers looked better cared for; some of the cavalry had received remounts, and everything was in excellent order. It was wonderful what a good general can effect in a couple of days.

When I came to the headquarters I was shown straight into the Emperor's room. He was drinking coffee at a writing-table, with a big plan drawn out on paper in front of him.



His two eyes transfixed me like bayonets.

Berthier and Macdonald were leaning, one over each shoulder, and he was talking so quickly that I don't believe that either of them could catch a half of what he was saying. But when his eyes fell upon me he dropped the pen on to the chart, and he sprang up with a look in his pale face which struck me cold.

"What the deuce are you doing here?" he shouted. When he was angry he had a voice like a peacock.

"I have the honour to report to you, sire," said I, "that I have delivered your dispatch safely to the King of Spain."

"What!" he yelled, and his two eyes transfixed me like bayonets. Oh, those dreadful eyes, shifting from grey to blue, like steel in the sunshine. I can see them now when I have a bad dream.

"What has become of Charpentier?" he asked.

"He is captured," said Macdonald.

"By whom?"

"The Russians."

"The Cossacks?"

"No, a single Cossack."

"He gave himself up?"

"Without resistance."

"He is an intelligent officer. You will see that the medal of honour is awarded to him."

When I heard those words I had to rub my eyes to make sure that I was awake.

"As to you," cried the Emperor, taking a step forward as if he would have struck me, "you brain of a hare, what do you think that you were sent upon this mission for? Do you conceive that I would send a really important message by such a hand as yours, and through every village which the enemy holds? How you came through them passes my comprehension; but if your fellow-messenger had had but as little sense as you, my whole plan of campaign would have been ruined. Can you not see, *coglione*, that this message contained false news, and that it was intended to deceive the enemy whilst I put a very different scheme into execution?"

When I heard those cruel words and saw the angry, white face which glared at me, I had to hold the back of a chair, for my mind was failing me and my knees would hardly bear me up. But then I took courage as I reflected that I was an honourable gentleman, and that my whole life had been spent in toiling for this man and for my beloved country.

"Sire," said I, and the tears would trickle down my cheeks whilst I spoke, "when you are dealing with a man like me you would find it wiser to deal openly. Had I known that you had wished the dispatch to fall into the hands of the enemy, I would have seen that it came there. As I believed that I was to guard it, I was prepared to sacrifice my life for it. I do not believe, sire, that any man in the world ever met with more toils and perils than I have done in trying to carry out what I thought was your will."

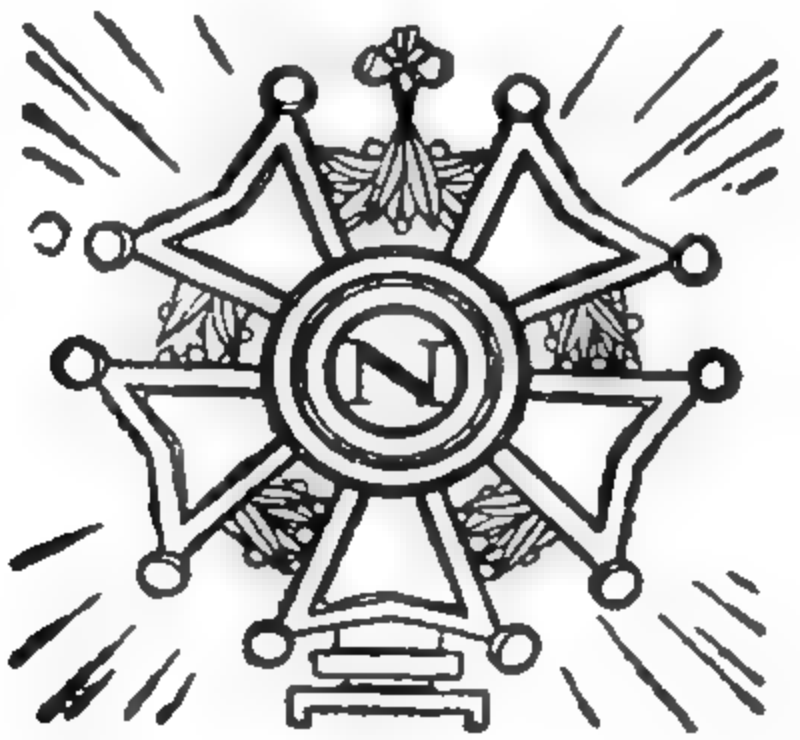
I dashed the tears from my eyes as I spoke, and with such

fire and spirit as I could command I gave him an account of it all, of my dash through Soissons, my brush with the dragoons, my adventure in Senlis, my *rencontre* with Count Boutkine in the cellar, my disguise, my meeting with the Cossack officer, my flight, and how at the last moment I was nearly cut down by a French dragoon. The Emperor, Berthier, and Macdonald listened with astonishment on their faces. When I had finished Napoleon stepped forward and he pinched me by the ear.

"There, there!" said he. "Forget anything which I may have said. I would have done better to trust you. You may go."

I turned to the door, and my hand was upon the handle, when the Emperor called upon me to stop.

"You will see," said he, turning to the Duke of Tarentum, "that Brigadier Gerard has the special medal of honour, for I believe that if he has the thickest head he has also the stoutest heart in my army."



"Smash-and-grab raid!" shouted Dick Banker.

S. MALCOLM KIRK

★

Smash and grab

"CRASH!" A star-like shape shivered the plate-glass window of Messrs. Jackman & Co., Ltd., Jewellers. The man who had thrown the brick which had caused the trouble rapidly scooped diamond rings, watches and gold and silver cigarette-cases into a bag.

"Smash - and - grab raid!" shouted Dick Banker, pushing his school cap farther back on his head. "Come on, Harold!"

Harold Cunningham came on, but not very willingly. He was different from Dick. If there was any trouble going he liked to keep out of it, while Dick seemed to welcome any sort of row or adventure.

Before they could get near the shop, the dark-skinned man who had made the raid started to run to a car which was standing by the pavement. Dick dashed after him, but collided with a man who was coming from the opposite direction. He was well-dressed and looked as if he was going to a wedding, for he had a large white carnation in his button-hole.

When Dick recovered his balance, the car was out of sight round the corner.

"Phew!" gasped Dick. "Bad business."

A crowd had already collected and a large bobby was blowing his whistle for assistance. At the shop door stood a fattish man with a black moustache, who gazed at the

broken window with dismay. He was either Mr. Jackman or may have been Co.

"I've got the number of the car!" cried Dick excitedly.

The policeman didn't seem to be much impressed.

"Thanks, sonny, but I've already had it from this gentleman here," and he indicated the man Dick had bumped into. "In any case, I expect the car will have been stolen or had false number-plates. Still, it will have to be checked. Why aren't you two laddies at school, eh?"

"We've got a whole holiday," said Dick with dignity. He didn't like being called 'sonny'; after all, he was fourteen and Harold was only a few months younger. "Come on, Harold, let's go!"

They made their way to a near-by café and consoled themselves with a glass of lemonade and some cream cakes.

"Miserable hound!" said Dick as he bit an éclair. "I was only trying to be helpful. Calling me 'sonny'!"

"Don't suppose he meant anything by it," Harold said in a way which was meant to soothe Dick down a little.

"Don't I wish we could do something to catch that smash-and-grab blighter! Wouldn't it be grand, Harold? That would show 'em. There've been an awful lot of these raids lately."

"And they don't seem to catch anyone," said Harold.

"Well, come on! Let's go down to the Strand and have a look at that model engine."

It was Dick's birthday, and his mother had given him some money so that he might come to London from his home in Croydon and buy his own present. He had seen a railway engine in a shop in the Strand and was very keen to buy it.

As they went down the escalator at Oxford Circus Tube Station, Harold looked at the people coming up the other side. He was a great reader of Sherlock Holmes stories and tried to follow his methods. He watched passers-by and tried to guess all kinds of facts from their appearance. Suddenly he nudged Dick.

"Look at that man. Haven't you seen him before?"

Dick looked at the dark-skinned man coming up the opposite escalator and whistled.

"You're right, Harold. I'd swear he was the one. What are we going to do now?"

The man was dressed in a dark coat, with a black hat pulled down over his eyes. He puffed at a cigarette in a long holder.

"Come on!" cried Dick. "We mustn't lose him now."

He turned and galloped up the descending stairs. Harold followed him.

Suddenly he nudged Dick. "Look at that man. Haven't you seen him before?"

The boys found it very difficult to make progress against the escalator, but by running hard they managed it. People looked at them in amazement, but when they saw they were only schoolboys they just laughed. Fortunately the ticket-collector at the top hadn't noticed what they were doing. He looked a little surprised when Dick handed him their tickets, but accepted the explanation that they had left a pair of gloves behind.

By this time Darkie, as Dick had already named him, was outside the station. Dick was afraid they would lose him in the crowd, but there he was loitering at a bookstall.

"We'd better tell a policeman," whispered Harold.

"No time," replied Dick. "We'd lose him for a cert. Look, he's off!"

They followed their quarry along Oxford Street until he entered an amusement arcade. The place wasn't crowded, so the boys had to busy themselves with the penny-in-the-slot machines while they watched Darkie out of the corner of their eyes.

The man wandered about the arcade as if he had all day on his hands. He went along to the shooting-range, picked up a rifle, and, scarcely pausing to take aim, plonked five shots into the bull's-eye. Taking the packet of cigarettes he received as a prize, he stuck one of them in his empty holder.

Then, hardly opening his lips, he whispered out of the side of his mouth: "Seen Lofty?" addressing his question to the man at the shooting-range.

The man, a tough-looking individual with a livid scar across his left cheek, whispered hoarsely back: "Should be here any minute now."

Harold had come to an end of his pennies, but Dick had some change and they continued trying to get packets of cigarettes and boxes of matches from the Giant Grabber. They didn't want either of the prizes very much, which was just as well, as they had no success. Darkie was still drifting around the arcade.

A little man went up to Darkie and asked him for a light.

The little man was rather like a monkey.

Instantly Dick left the Giant Grabber and moved to a fortune-telling machine close by. Harold went to a pint-table.

The little man was rather like a monkey, with a wizened face and a ragged grey beard. Micky the Monk, Dick named him in his own mind.

"Everything stowed away all right?" asked Darkie.

"O.K."

"Boss pleased?"

"Ought to be." Mickey spat on the ground. "Good haul. Be there about seven for the share-out."

"O.K."

Darkie was on the move. Dick grabbed Harold's arm. The latter complained bitterly. He only wanted another thousand to win a prize and he had two balls in hand. But Dick saw that there was no time to waste.

Outside the amusement arcade, Darkie stood for a few minutes drawing at his cigarette. He still seemed to be in no hurry, so the boys were unprepared for his sudden move

when it came. A bus, which had been slowed up by the traffic, was passing; and just as the bus quickened its pace Darkie caught hold of the rail and swung himself on board. The action was so sudden that Dick and Harold lost all chance of following him.

"That's torn it!" said Dick ruefully. "We've lost him now. Did you notice where the bus was going, Harold?"

"Alperton," answered Harold promptly. "I don't think it'll help us much though. Seems to me he only took that bus because it was on the move and he wanted to make sure he wasn't followed. Do you think he spotted us?"

"Don't see how he could have done. Good! There's Micky coming out."

"Who?" Harold was puzzled.

"Micky the Monk! That little man Darkie was talking to. Let's follow him. Hope he doesn't do the bus trick. If he does, we're sunk."

Fortunately Micky didn't. He got on a bus but he did so at a proper bus-stop, and as he went upstairs Dick and Harold were able to go inside and keep watch.

They took tickets to the terminus as they didn't know where Micky was going. It was sevenpence each, and Dick thought that at this rate, with what they had spent at the arcade, there wouldn't be much of his birthday money left at the end of the day.

Micky got off at the Monument. Neither of the boys knew this part of London well, but they followed the old man as he shuffled off down the street. Once or twice he gave a cunning glance back, but then the boys managed to be looking in a shop window and he didn't notice them.

After a time he seemed to think he was safe and didn't look back any more. He led the way along narrow lanes and alleys until the boys were lost.

At last he stopped in front of a large warehouse. Taking a key from his pocket, he opened a small door beside the big gates and went in. As the door slammed behind him, the boys looked at one another.

"What do we do now?" asked Dick.

"Go for the police," said Harold. He wasn't a funk, but he liked a quiet life. He left all the initiative to Dick.

"What are we going to tell them? We know Darkie was in the smash-and-grab raid, but it's only our word against his. Micky may have had nothing to do with it. No, we must get into that warehouse."

"Get in?" Harold was taken aback. This was worse than he had feared.

"If we can." Dick was cheerful about it. "I mean to make a good try."

The gates were high with spikes on top to discourage climbers, so it was no easy task. The warehouse belonged to the Farmore Enterprises, Ltd., Export Merchants, according to a notice over the gates. Next door there were more big gates which belonged to Ford & Co., Firework Manufacturers. There were no windows they could hope to reach.

"Let's try the back," suggested Dick, not at all upset by the difficulties in front of them.

The back of the warehouse was down an even smaller alley. It was quite deserted except for a dirty white cat attempting the hopeless task of washing its face clean.

"That's the place." Dick pointed to it. "I think we might get over this wall."

He looked carefully round, then, taking a flying leap, he managed to get his hands on the top of the wall and pull himself up.

"Come on, Harold, it's easy."

In a few minutes Harold was sitting beside him, and together they dropped down into a small yard.

There was a door at the back of the warehouse, but when Dick tried it he found it was locked.

"Don't see that we're much better off here," grumbled Harold. "We still can't get in."

"Don't be in such a hurry. You didn't expect to find the door wide open and 'welcome' on the mat, did you? I think if you made a back I could reach that window up there."

Now he could reach it easily. . . . It opened sufficiently for him to climb through.

But Dick found that he could only just touch the window, so he got down and climbed up on Harold's shoulders. Now he could reach it easily. He pulled and it opened slightly. Rust in the hinges was all that was holding it, Dick decided, so he pulled harder. It opened sufficiently for him to climb through.

"Look out below," he called to Harold, and with a spring he got one knee on the window-ledge. Harold couldn't have looked out sufficiently, as he staggered back and fell to the ground. Dick was too busy trying to squeeze himself through the window to see what had happened. He managed to get through, but it was a snug fit.

Dropping down into an empty room, he made his way into a passage and opened the door with a key he found on the inside. Harold was still dusting his clothes.

"Sorry, Harold, but I did tell you to look out. Anyhow, we're inside now."

They shut the door and stood for a moment listen-

ing. There was no sound in the warehouse, but from some distance away they could hear the steady pulse of machinery. The place was festooned with cobwebs and everywhere was filthy.

"Let's go upstairs," whispered Dick. "And be careful how you go; some of those steps look decidedly rocky."

The next moment he caught his foot and fell sprawling. The noise sounded like a clap of thunder in the silent warehouse.

They stood holding their breaths until Harold felt he would burst. They heard nothing. If Micky was still in the place, he was lying low.

When they decided it was safe, Dick tried all the doors on the landing. Every one was locked, and though Dick squinted through the keyholes he could see nothing but a lot of wooden cases. "Just what you'd expect in a warehouse," he grumbled. "Come on, Harold, let's go up to the next floor."

But the next landing was just the same; all the doors were locked. As they tried the last, Dick almost shouted with delight when it opened. Then he could have wept with disappointment. The place was empty. It was a high room and at one side there was a ladder going up through a trap-door in the ceiling.

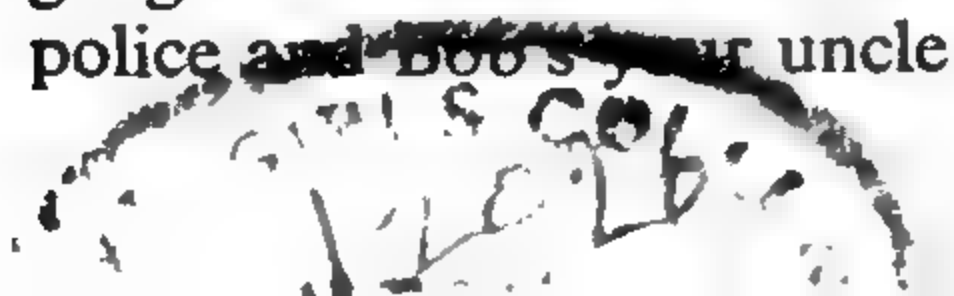
"We'd better go up and look round," moaned Dick. "But I think we've drawn a blank, Harold."

Harold said nothing. He had been thinking for some time that they must have got into the wrong warehouse.

Dick climbed the ladder like a monkey. He jumped through the trap-door, then shouted excitedly: "This looks like the real McKay, Harold!"

Harold soon joined him. In the loft there were large wooden cases full of furs. They were beautiful furs, and though the boys didn't know much about furs they felt these must be very valuable. Other boxes held cigarettes—millions of them Dick said there were.

"This is their hiding-place, Harold. I knew it was. The gang store all their loot here. Now we have only to go to the police and Boo s[illegible] uncle!"



They made for the trap-door. When Dick looked down he realized, very decidedly, that Bob wasn't his uncle. While they had been busy looking at the furs, someone had taken the ladder away.

"Gosh!" cried Dick. "Now we're in the jolly old soup. What are we going to do? We can't jump down; it's too high."

Harold said nothing. There didn't seem to be anything to say, and on such occasions Harold kept a silent tongue. He went to the window and looked out. Through the dirt on the pane he could see the molten metal of the Thames silvery in the growing twilight. Soon it would be quite dark. He gave a shiver as he thought of their prison.

Suddenly Dick jumped up.

"Eureka! I've got it, Harold. We must throw a lot of the furs down the trap, then it will be safe to drop on them. Bob's still my uncle!"

Harold looked through the trap and shuddered. Even with a great pile of furs at the bottom, it would be frightening, especially in the growing darkness. But if Dick did it, he would have to follow him; he'd never let Dick down yet.

To Dick it was easy as falling off a log; he said as much and was already lifting furs out of the boxes and throwing them through the trap. Black furs, brown furs, mink, coney and fox—Harold knew the names even if he didn't know which was which. Soon there was a large pile.

"Here goes!" cried Dick. There was no question as to who would go first. Dick led; Harold followed. Dick lowered himself through the trap, hung for a moment by his hands, then let go.

"Happy landing!" he called out as he lay asprawl the heap of furs. He picked himself up and made way for Harold.

Now for it! But Harold hesitated. It wasn't that he was a coward, at least he didn't think he was, but he had a horror of heights. It had been bad enough climbing the ladder, but then he didn't have to look down. To hang by his arms, his

Dick hung for a moment by his hands; then let go.

legs swinging, then let go and land twenty feet below was no joke. Even the thought of the furs did little to reassure him. He was going to follow Dick, of course, but he had to get used to the idea first.

He looked down through the trap. At that moment there was an interruption. Dick was about to call up and ask if Harold was going to be all day when the door opened and Micky came in. He looked at Dick as if he had been expecting to find someone there.

"So it is only a little boy. You made enough noise for two. A little boy come to visit old Brandon. How nice!

Come with me, my dear, and old Brandon will make you very welcome."

Dick stood where he was. He hadn't quite made up his mind what to do. Micky was a sinister little figure, but he was only an old man.There was nothing to be frightened of.

Brandon came a step nearer. When his voice came again it was harsher.

"Come here, boy, when I tell you." He made another step towards Dick and laid a hand on his shoulder. Dick did his best to throw the hand off, but to Harold's surprise he failed. The little man had the strength of an ape; Dick was like a child in his grip. The boy struggled furiously, but Micky half-carried, half-dragged him from the room. The door closed behind them.

'Now is the time to drop down and go to Dick's rescue,' thought Harold. But before he had time to do anything the door opened again and three men came in. One was the man with a scar they had seen at the shooting-range. He

The little man had the strength of an ape.

carried a lantern, and so Harold could see him clearly.

The door shut again and Harold was left alone in the growing darkness. Now he had time to think. Brandon hadn't guessed there were two of them, that was one good thing, but what could he do? If Dick had been here he would soon have thought of some plan; Harold didn't find it so easy. The situation was as nasty as he could have imagined. Dick was a prisoner. Well, so was he for the matter of that. There seemed to be no way out of the loft.

Despondently, he put his hands in his pockets and felt a box of matches. It was a new one; he had picked it up in the kitchen that morning. It didn't seem to be a great deal of help, but at least it was some comfort to know that he needn't remain in the dark all the time.

Was there any way out of the loft? There was no door, but what about the window? He'd forgotten that. He went across to it and looked out. By now it was quite dark outside. He could see lights winking and blinking along the Thames. If he could only attract someone's attention! The only plan he could think of was to set the place on fire. That would certainly bring the police, but he would be burnt alive and probably Dick as well. No, that wasn't a good idea.

Was the window any use? The thought of the drop outside made him feel sick, but it was the only way left. With the light of a match he saw that the window would open if he used a little force. He pushed and it gave suddenly.

He looked out and saw a ledge. It wasn't very wide, but if he had the nerve he could make his way along it.

It had to be done; there was no other way. If only he needn't think of the height of the warehouse! But he couldn't fail Dick. If the only way was along the ledge, along the ledge he must go.

Once he was out of the window he found the ledge wider than his fears had made it appear. There was a gutter above him and by holding on to this he could make his way along, sliding one foot at a time.

To the left the way was blocked by a sort of wire fence,

so he went to the right. The journey along the ledge seemed to take hours. Sliding his feet was tiring, but he thought he had better go slowly.

Then he saw ahead of him another wire fence. His way was blocked and he could go no farther. The thought of turning and retracing his steps was bitter.

Then he saw he had reached another window which, to his delight, opened easily. Now he might find a way down

The journey along the ledge seemed to take hours.

to the street. He crept through and lowered himself on to a case which was full of long, tubular articles; he couldn't think what they might be.

As soon as he reached the floor he lit a match and had a look around. Then he saw. Rockets! Of course, Ford & Co., Firework Manufacturers. There were other fireworks lying about and a quantity of touch-paper.

He went to the door and was pleased to find that it was a Yale-type lock which could easily be opened from his side.

Now was his chance to go to Dick's help. He had started down the stairs when he had an idea.

Going back into the room, he gathered a quantity of fireworks, and climbed out of the window. It may have been that he was getting used to the ledge, but the return journey was much easier, though this time he was burdened with the fireworks.

When he reached the loft window, Harold set up his fireworks. He had chosen them carefully with a view to making as much show as possible. Rockets he had in great quantities, and roman candles, coloured flares and cannons.

He went back and fetched another bundle of fireworks and fixed them all up with touch-paper fuses. Setting them off with one of his matches, he scurried back to the other window. He felt so much at home on the ledge now that he couldn't understand why he had ever been frightened of it. He even ventured to look down to the streets and was glad to see that there were plenty of people about. Someone was sure to see his display and he didn't think the police would let it go on long.

At that moment the first rocket went off, 'zzzzzzwhish!' Then another, followed by a couple of roman candles. It was a fine sight up there above London, and Harold would have liked to stop and watch, but he had to think of Dick.

He made his way through the firework room and out at the door. Before he left he collected a few fireworks and put them in his pocket; they might come in useful later on.

The next thing he had to do was to get back into the warehouse and find Dick. He went down the dusty stairs and along a passage. From the length and direction of the passage he thought he must be back in the Farmore Enterprises' warehouse. It looked as if the two were joined together.

Now he had to be careful. At any moment he might come on Micky or one of his gang. He listened and heard the sound of voices from the floor below.

Down another lot of even dirtier stairs he crept until he

came to a half-open door. There was a light inside. Peeping in, Harold could see six men sitting on cases, grouped in a half-circle. Then he saw something which made him tingle all over. Dick was sitting on a chair in the middle. He wasn't tied up, but the men were watching him closely.

"Who sent you here?" demanded Brandon harshly.

"No one," Dick defied him. "I came on my own."

"It's no use wasting any more time with him," growled Darkie. "The boss says we've got to be off tonight, so we'd better get a move on, 'e don't like people who hang about."

"Wot are you goin' to do with the kid?" asked the man with a scar.

"Either slit his throat or dump him in the country somewhere," said Brandon, as coolly as if he had been speaking of disposing of an unwanted kitten. "The boss will tell us when he comes."

Harold shuddered. If he wanted to help Dick he would have to act quickly. The room was lit by a single unshaded electric bulb. Lighting his largest cannon, Harold waited until the fuse had partly burnt, then, greatly daring, he reached into the room and switched off the light. As the room was plunged in darkness, he threw the cannon among the men. The explosion was tremendous. Even Harold, who was expecting it, was taken aback.

Taking advantage of the confusion his cannon had caused, Harold rushed into the room, grabbed Dick by the arm and shouting: "Come on, Dick!" almost dragged him through the door.

Dick was bemused by the explosion. He hardly knew what he was doing, but he recognized Harold's voice and followed willingly. They ran as hard as they could go along the dark corridor.

Suddenly Harold, who was leading, ran full tilt against a wall. He couldn't understand what had happened. He was quite sure they hadn't gone the full length of the warehouse yet. He risked lighting one of his precious matches and found to his dismay that they were in a dead end. The

Harold could see six men, grouped in a half-circle. Dick was sitting on a chair in the middle.

He found to his dismay that they were in a dead end.

passage had no outlet. He must have taken the wrong way.

As the match burned out, he saw a small door in a corner. There were sounds of their pursuers behind them getting louder.

"Get in here, Dick!" he shouted; he seemed to have taken over the leadership. By the light of another match they saw the room was half-full of large wooden cases. Creeping behind a pile of them, they lay hidden in a corner. Would the thieves know they had come this way? If they did, their hiding-place wouldn't serve them long.

They lay quiet and waited. Their breath was still coming in great gulps from their run. The voices came nearer and nearer. Then the light was switched on. For a moment Harold was blinded, then, peeping between two cases, he saw the gang coming in, led by Darkie. Brandon was close behind him.

"They came this way, I'll swear!" croaked Brandon. "Curse the little blighters! Find 'em."

It didn't take long. In a few minutes the two boys had been dragged out and marched up to Brandon, who seemed to be in charge. They tried to struggle, but the rough treatment they received soon convinced them that they had no chance against their captors.

"Hold 'em tight!" ordered Brandon. "The boss is on his way here. He'll know what to do with 'em."

At that moment 'The Boss' walked in. Harold almost cried out with astonishment. 'The Boss' was the well-dressed man with the white carnation in his buttonhole whom they had seen talking to the policeman outside the jewellers'.

"So you've turned up again, have you?" he snarled. "Well, you've poked your nose into other people's business once too often. I'm not going to have my plans spoilt by a couple of kids. . . . Brandon!"

"Yes, Boss," the little man spoke with great respect.

"Put the little blighters to sleep and then dump their bodies in the Thames."

Harold shuddered at the cold-blooded way he spoke. Brandon caught him by the shoulder and at the same time Darkie seized Dick.

The boys looked round the close circle of faces. There was not a sign of mercy among the lot of them.

For a moment there was a silence, then there came a noise from the lower floor of the warehouse. Someone was beating on the outer door. One of the men dashed out at a word from 'The Boss.' The rest waited anxiously.

"It's the police, Boss!" The man was back. "A whole crowd of them."

"Tie up the boys!" barked 'The Boss.' "Then hide them behind the cases. We can't afford to have any dead bodies about. You can attend to them later, Brandon."

The room buzzed with action. Dick and Harold, tied and gagged, lay hidden once more behind the cases and could not see what was happening. Then all the men went out and the boys were left in the darkness.

Though they had been tied up in such a hurry, the knots

were efficient. No wriggling or straining seemed to loosen them in the slightest. They could only wait and hope.

At last the door opened and the light was switched on.

"What's in those cases?" demanded a new voice.

"Merchandise." 'The Boss' sounded very polite. "Mostly engineering parts. Like to see inside them?"

"No thanks!" The voice seemed satisfied. "And you have no idea how those fireworks were set off?"

"It must have been a couple of boys we chased out a short time ago. Don't know how they got in. I let that part of the warehouse to a firework manufacturer and he isn't here at the moment. My men soon put the fireworks out."

They seemed to be about to leave the room. Harold was desperate. It was their last chance. He couldn't cry out, his gag was too tight for that, but he could move his legs slightly, and he managed to drum his heels against one of the wooden cases. Dick must have had the same idea, and between them they made a lot of noise.

"Hey, what's that?" asked the strange voice.

"Just the old dog that keeps down the rats," explained 'The Boss.' "It wags its tail against the cases."

"Oh, that's what it is, is it?" There was a pause, and the boys' hearts sank. Then the strange voice went on: "Mighty queer dog! I'd like to have a look at a dog which can make that much noise with its tail."

He must have stepped forward, as Harold found himself looking up at a big policeman.

"Look out, Roberts," came another voice. The policeman ducked, just in time to escape a swinging blow as 'The Boss' went for him with a piece of iron bar.

The policeman's whistle shrilled. What happened next the boys couldn't see, but from the sound of it there was an Al scrimmage in progress. It was violent, but it couldn't have lasted long. In a few minutes the policeman was back, cutting their ropes and taking the gags from their mouths.

"Why, it's a couple of kids!" he exclaimed. "What on earth are you doing here?"

Harold found himself looking up at a big policeman.

Prompting one another, chipping in with the parts the other didn't know, Dick and Harold told their story. They led the police to the loft where the stolen goods were hidden. The six men and 'The Boss' had all been captured and, as the police-inspector told them at the station, it would mean the break-up of the gang.

It was late that night when the boys got home. The police had telephoned their parents so that they wouldn't be worried. When they did get back, they still glowed from the thanks and praise of the inspector.

"But it was really all your doing, Harold," said Dick. "If you hadn't got cracking when you did, I don't know what would have happened to me."

"Nonsense!" laughed Harold. "If it hadn't been for you, we should never have got into the factory in the first place. I say, we didn't manage to look at the engine."

"Never mind," said Dick, "we'll do that another day."

"I want to fly to the gold diggings."

[See page 65

DENIS CLARK

★

The saga of the 'Hungry Hen'

HE limped into the small airless shed which Fred Mason called his 'Flight Office.' He wore a bleached khaki shirt, patched, shorts, and a broad-brimmed hat with an old scarf twisted round its crown. His face, arms and chest were burnt the colour of Fred's briar pipe.

"Hullo," Fred greeted him, lifting his feet off the table and his eyes from a tatty freight bill. "What can we do *you* for?"

"I want to fly to the gold diggings."

He dumped a dusty rucksack on the little room's floor, and laid hat and stick on top. Fred looked at him rather more closely. He did not look any too hopeful a 'prospect,' but any prospect was a blessing in these hard-up days when, sometimes, he wished something would happen to his one ancient aircraft. He could claim the insurance then, wind up the small charter company, and start off with a clean sheet.

"Okay," he said. "We can fix that. We'll be flying to-morrow."

"How much?"

Fred stood up, stretched, relit his pipe and thoughtfully stamped on a small scorpion which had come crawling out of the wall. 'Mustn't scare this prospect,' he thought.

"Thirty-five quid," he said carefully.

The stranger flinched. "What!"

"Thirty-five quid. That's less than our normal charge."

"Oh lord," sighed the stranger. "I thought it might be pretty stiff—but not all that stiff——"

"Look here," Fred told him. "Do you know what it costs to buy a bottle of lemonade down on the diggings? It costs half a crown—and it's not even good lemonade. It's not been in sight of a lemon. It's made by a Greek out of carbon dioxide and acid, and I wouldn't drink it if you paid me. But the diggers pay half a crown for it. Why? Because there's no railway or road, and nothing to take anything there except this old packet of mine. Do y'know what it costs *me* each time I fly down to the diggings?"

The stranger shook his head sadly and picked up his rucksack. "Don't bother to tell me," he said. "I haven't got thirty-five quid. I haven't got twenty. I thought maybe if I reached the diggings I could make a living. I don't want to quit Africa. Oh, well. . . ." And he put on his hat.

"What have you been doing?" Fred asked, less out of real curiosity than because he had a feeling of sympathy.

"I've been working on the groundnuts clearings—driving bulldozers. The vibration played gyp with my leg. It got hurt in the war. So I had to turn the job in. They wanted to send me to England——"

Fred was staring at the faded scarf on the stranger's shabby felt hat.

"Were you R.A.F.?" he asked.

"Yes, I was. Well, so long for now."

"Wait a minute," Fred called. He followed the other man out to where he stood under the windsock, limp in the breathless heat. "Look here," he said, "we've special rates for ex-R.A.F. types. Bob Barnes—he's my partner—and I were both R.A.F. too. What's your name?"

"Steve Anderson——"

"Aircrew?"

"Yes. Bomber Command."

Zebras and giraffes galloped stiff-legged away as the aircraft's shadow raced towards them.

"Well, look Steve, we'll fly you down for a nominal fee. You can give us a hand with the freight. Some of 'em have struck it lucky and could use an extra hand——"

"I say, thanks a lot," Steve said. "I can't tell you—oh, well—I'll be here for take-off tomorrow."

It was grand to be airborne again, Steve thought, as he sat in the cabin behind Fred and Bob. Fred was pilot and Bob navigator. Behind, the fuselage was piled with bundles and cases, mining equipment, provisions, and crates packed with beer and that expensive lemonade. He stared at the African scenery sliding beneath them. White surf and coconut groves, then great stretches of green, spiky sisal. Now they had left cultivation and were sweeping inland above jungle. Hullo,

there were some zebras and giraffes, galloping stiff-legged away as the aircraft's shadow raced towards them.

Funny thing was that this old kite of Fred's was quite clearly a converted bomber, the same type of bomber, a Whitley, in which Steve had done his first operational tour. They had started the war as the pride of the R.A.F.'s striking force—'Flying Coffins' their aircrews had called them with wry affection—but had been discarded for the four-engined 'jobs' and used thenceforward mainly for training. Funny, finding one like this, right away out in the blue. Of course, it had been modified. Front and tail turrets had gone, and everything cleared to provide maximum space for cargo. Steve started back to explore.

"Well, I'm blowed," he muttered presently. By the side of the fuselage door, which had been widened to take in freight, he had found a big duralumin patch. No, it couldn't be. Such coincidences didn't happen. He moved on towards the tail. But—here were the holes in a row, five patches in all, where a Messerschmitt night-fighter's cannon had raked from the quarter. Something had happened to that night-fighter. He remembered it driving to earth, a golden flare jetting and clouding, until it crashed down on the deck. He remembered it well, because that was the night and the fighter which had made him lame. And that patch by the door—that was that great chunk of flak they'd picked up over the Ruhr. That had nearly knocked them from the sky. In the gloom of the freight-lumbered fuselage Steve grinned and swore softly. So this was the old 'Hungry Hen,' who night after night had laid her deadly eggs over Germany, now finishing her days freight-ferrying for a charter company.

He made his way forward again. The 'Hungry Hen' soared along smoothly, only now and again meeting pockets in the windless heat which made her drop with sudden violence. Fred was handling her with cool experience. He had done his war flying on Sunderlands, he had told Steve, and found flying the two-engined bomber 'a piece of cake' after those enormous, four-engined boats. The panorama had changed

now. They were flying over an escarpment, across a vast forest-clad plateau, nine thousand feet high. There was nothing to see but the dense tops of heavy rain forest. Steve stood close to Bob who was busy map-reading their course. He must tell him this was his old kite.

"We'll be going down presently," Bob shouted above the roar of the engines. "Get down to two thousand feet and

Here were the holes in a row, five patches in all.

follow the river." He pointed their way on his map. A long, snaking river, the Tana, wound through the plains. It flowed into and out of a lake, then widened and spread among islands. Then it flowed into another lake, and somewhere near that lake, Steve knew, was the place where men dug and washed gold.

"I say," Steve shouted excitedly, "this aircraft of yours was *my* old bag of tricks in the war. We christened her the 'Hungry Hen.' The name's probably still on the fuselage, under the paint. I flew twenty-six sorties in her."

Bob looked up. "No fooling?" he said. "Well, I'm

jiggered! Of all the rum chances. Fred!" he shouted to tell him the news—and just then it happened. With a sudden and hideous crash the front of the cabin caved in. Fragments from the broken window flew clattering round them. Fred slumped sideways, one arm round the stick, and the big aircraft shuddered and dived steeply, out of control.

The cabin seemed filled with brown feathers, as if someone had ripped a pillow. Through them Steve saw Bob dash to Fred and heave him away from the controls. An untidy bundle of plumage and red tatters had somehow appeared on the navigator's little table.

One hazard of tropical flying is the vulture. The great birds soar far up in the sky, hanging on their mighty wings while, across miles of space, they watch the next aerial sentry. When he starts to descend they go too, following down, each in turn, to the jungle thousands of feet below where a lion or leopard or hunter has slain and left carrion. Meanwhile they wheel high, poised on their sombre pinions, a menace to ill-fortuned airmen. The impact of their heavy bodies is sufficient to shatter the structure of lightly-built aircraft. Had it struck wings or fuselage fairly, the Whitley might well have suffered nothing worse than a dent. But this wretched bird had flown hard and fast into the panel through which the pilot looked ahead. There had been no avoiding the impact. One moment, the sky had been empty. The next, aircraft and vulture had met.

Steve jumped to give Bob a hand. The stick was free now from Fred's body. Given time and enough space the aircraft might level itself, though now it was still in a desperate dive to starboard. Fred's nose was bleeding and he had a blue smudge on his forehead where the hurtling vulture had struck him. Slipping on the steeply tilting floor, Bob dragged him clear. Steve stared at him speechlessly. A howling blast tore through the great hole. Through it he saw a sickening view of jungle and river spinning and sweeping towards them. He grabbed hold of Fred's empty seat to stop himself falling into the aircraft's nose. What should they do now?

The aircraft dived steeply. . . . The cabin seemed filled with brown feathers. . . . Steve jumped to give Bob a hand.

In an instant he knew. "*Take over, you fool!*" shouted Bob, dropping Fred for a moment to shove Steve at the empty seat. "Pull her out quick—or we've had it!"

Steve stared at him. "But—aren't you——?"

"I'm a navigator—not a pilot," Bob yelled at him. "For God's sake take over. You've flown enough hours in this crate—you said so yourself!"

"Yes, but——" Steve began. He found himself at the controls. He caught hold of the stick. His feet, lame and good, found the rudder-bar. Hard and harder, then with all his might, he began to drag the stick back. If the wings came off he couldn't help it. They were barely a thousand feet up. But a Whitley's wings never come off.

"By George, it was lucky it happened above the edge of the escarpment," Bob said presently. "If we'd been over the plateau, or lost height to follow the river, we'd never have pulled out!"

"Where is the river?" asked Steve.

"We're flying above it. Didn't you know that?" asked Bob.

Steve grunted something. Truth to tell, once he had pulled the aircraft out of that dive, his eyes had not left the instrument panel before them. He was trying to sort out from memory the various dials, knobs and gauges.

"Do the engines sound all right?" he asked. It had seemed to him their steady roar had broken once or twice.

"Sound as a bell!" Bob assured him. Bob was on top of the world, as are most men when they emerge from a fearful ordeal. Steve wondered just how he would feel if he told him the truth.

"How's Fred?" he shouted. The gale through the cockpit was better, now they were out of that dive. But it still howled around him and blew his hair madly about.

"I think he's all right," Bob yelled back. "Dopey—half conscious, you know. That fowl caught him a hell of a whack. I've been pouring lemonade over him, and down his throat——"

In spite of his worries Steve could not hold back a grin. That precious lemonade!

"How does she handle?" Bob was asking him now.

"So so," Steve told him. He hoped the old 'Hungry Hen' would live up to the Whitley's reputation of flying herself. "Tell me when I alter course."

"Nothing to it now," Bob reassured him. "Straight down the river for another two hundred miles. Then you'll see our strip. Go in to land. It's as easy as kissing your hand."

'Is it?' Steve wondered. 'You wait till we get there, my lad.' But he kept that thought to himself.

The 'Hungry Hen' behaved admirably. Straight and level she flew, so that all he need do was to keep his hands resting quite lightly on the controls. To an onlooker she might have appeared as if at any moment she intended to dive to ground. But Whitleys always flew 'nose heavy' and Steve began to feel more cheerful as her smooth, sullen roar lulled his senses.

They were passing over the first lake. A crimson cloud rose from one corner and floated below.

"Flamingos!" Bob yelled. "Millions of them!"

'I guess I'll go up a bit,' Steve thought. 'At this height, if I strike an air-pocket, there isn't much room.'

He started to climb, and as he climbed he saw below him, on the lake's far, swampy edge, a herd of a score or more elephants, sun glinting on the curved tusks of the restless, suspicious bulls.

"Not far now," said Bob. "A nice, three-point landing, and you've done a grand job. You deserve a medal for this!"

Steve all but told him to shut up. They were over the islands now. Then more river again. Then Bob said: "There's the gold diggings. And there's our landing strip. Can you see it?"

Yes, Steve saw it. He put on some bank and swung in on a wide circle, glaring down from the cabin. The one thing he had hoped for—wasn't. The windsock hung like a dead fish. If only there had been some wind to help him pull up!

At one end of the strip was the lake. At the other was scrub and some trees, and then what looked like a small earthquake. 'I suppose that's where they have been digging,' he thought miserably. 'If we up-end in one of those gulleys we haven't much hope. I'll have to go in t'wards the lake.'

His mind started working quickly, surprisingly quickly—as he remembered it working sometimes in the war.

Surely they must be down now. The lake seemed so close. He cut both engines and started to pull back the stick.

'Three hundred yards—then allow for a hundred-yard slide, if we don't get the wheels down. Hope she doesn't go up in flames.' "Bob!" he shouted. "D'you know how to let down the wheels?"

He ought to have remembered that. All aircrew ought to know that, but he had forgotten. Bob looked surprised, but knew that much. The undercarriage came down and locked.

"Now the flaps," Steve called. Once more Bob obliged, and the great flaps crept down from the trailing edge of the wings. Bob was staring at him in an odd, disconcerted way.

"Get back in the fuselage," Steve shouted to him. "Keep clear of that heavy freight. Hold Fred against you, and hang on to something—tight! Crash stations—I'm going to land!"

He turned in to the strip, got the nose pointing down the short runway. The lake was shining at its far end. He could see figures running, white men and natives, to meet them. Down, down—surely they must be down now. The lake seemed so close. He cut both engines and started to pull back the stick. *Wallop!* The 'Hungry Hen' bounced, then she started running. Like her namesake she scuttered at racing speed along the runway.

'Anyway, we *are* on the deck!' Steve thought, as she speeded on. They were reaching the end of the sand. Brakes —he'd forgotten the brakes—and now he had none to show him. He heard scrub and branches crackling and threshing beneath the wings and fuselage. The 'Hungry Hen' rocked crazily and made little jumps. Would she never pull up? Then *splash!* They had entered the soft, muddy edge of the lake. The 'Hungry Hen' forged on a little, then came to a standstill. She settled down into the ooze and thick yellow water came swirling to fill up her fuselage.

Steve jumped from his seat and stumbled aft out of the cabin. He had to duck under the main spar. He saw Bob, supporting Fred, struggling to get out at the door. The cargo had shifted and blocked their way out of the aircraft. Water was up to their waists.

Steve cast a glance back to the cabin. No good that way. The cockpit was half under water.

"Can't shift this!" Bob shouted. Together they tried, but the cargo's weight baffled their efforts. They were panting and sodden with dirty, stinking lake water. It seemed too bad they should drown now, after coming through everything else.

"Where's the axe?" shouted Steve. All big aircraft carry

an axe—or ought to do so. Bob found it and gave it to him.

Steve made his way towards the tail through the quick-rising water. There ought to be something, he knew, and he found it—a little trap-door in the roof, painted over and sealed long ago. It was stuck but it opened at last to the blows of his axe. He swung up and out, then reached down to draw Fred's still half-unconscious body out after him. Bob joined him on top of the fuselage. Careless of crocodiles, white 'diggers' and natives were splashing and hurrying to them.

"That was neat," Bob said admiringly. "How did you know?"

"I ought to," Steve said. "That was my special way out—in the old days, in an emergency."

"But it's at the wrong end of the aircraft——"

"Not for me," Steve told him briefly.

Bob stared at him, realizing certain odd facts; and in spite of the flush of exertion it seemed that he turned faintly green.

"You mean—you've not flown an aircraft before?"

"Just that—not till today," Steve reassured him. "'Course my skipper showed me the drill, in case there was nobody else . . . my crew job was gunner—*tail*-gunner." said Steve, grinning now it was all over.

H. V. PHILIPS

★

Hitch-hike holiday

I'D better start by saying I'm Charles Carew, and that I live with the kindest guardians in the world, Uncle Frank and Aunt Betty Ward, at Beamhurst, near Uttoxeter, Staffs. I am not yet sixteen. Bobby Bunting is my friend, the same age, and he lives quite close to us with his parents.

This spring we decided we'd like to do a hitch-hike and go to France. The idea was that we should take only ten pounds each for the whole trip, but if we were in any real difficulty we could wire for money to be sent to us, but we had to promise to come straight home when it arrived.

You can imagine how bucked we were when we got our passports. Bobby's father said he thought we'd be back in two days and not get very far, and certainly not out of England. He had a bet with Uncle Frank that anyhow we'd be back in less than a week. Aunt Betty said she'd be only too pleased if Uncle Frank did lose his bet.

We had thought out our kit with great care.

We had our hair well cut the day before we started off and bought pocket combs. I think it's worth while writing down what we wore. We both had the same things. A wool vest and short pants with a change of these in our knapsacks. A grey wool jumper with polo collar. Grey flannel coat and

shorts. Grey stockings, with an extra pair, darning needles and wool, and stout brown shoes which, though new, we had broken in well, and knew would give us no trouble. For these we had a brush and some polish. We'd sponges, tooth-brushes and paste, towels, and a tin of petroleum jelly in case our feet got sore. All these were rolled up in waterproof capes and put inside our light knapsacks, which we carried strapped to our backs. I had a metal drinking cup which we could share, and we both had a fair supply of plain chocolate.

We had a pound's worth of silver each in our trouser pockets, and our other nine pounds apiece were placed inside our passports and hidden in special pockets which Aunt Betty and Mrs. Bunting had rigged up inside our coat breast-pockets.

Uncle Frank and Aunt Betty saw me off after I'd had a cup of tea, and they were very cheery, though I know they didn't really much want me to go, but were jolly sporting about it. I was too much excited to mind parting with them and felt awfully selfish—I think I felt a little uncertain of myself after Aunt Betty kissed me goodbye, but I walked off quickly and was soon at Bobby's place as arranged. There Mrs. Bunting gave us a tip-top breakfast and still tried to dissuade us from going—but at 9.30 a.m. we got off, and swung cheerily into the Uttoxeter Road.

"I don't think it's worth while cadging for lifts until we get through Uttoxeter, do you?" I asked Bobby, and he agreed. We didn't walk too fast and didn't talk much until we were through the town and on the Doveridge Road which leads to Derby.

"This is the deuce of a hill," said Bobby. "If we can get a lift, let's have one."

"Right-ho," I said, and at that moment a car came up behind us. Up went our thumbs as a smart saloon car approached, driven by an equally smart-looking man with a neatly trimmed beard. He saw what we wanted, gave a contemptuous sneer and drove on.

"Nice manners; I'll remember his face if we ever meet

again and he wants me to help him," said Bobby bitterly.

We pounded on up the hill, and again heard a rumbling behind us. This time it was an empty lorry with a cheery-looking driver. He pulled up: "Shall I give you a lift? I'm going to Sudbury."

"Thanks awfully," I said, getting up next to him, while Bobby climbed up behind.

"Where are you off to?" asked the driver.

"Derby first, but we hope France later."

"France!" he ejaculated. "I was there in the war and I never want to go again—what's the idea?"

"Just adventure—we're going to see what it's like to have a hitch-hike trip, and we're going to try and work our passage and do odd jobs for food here and there."

"Oh, well, each one to his taste. Bust me if I'd go to France, though!"

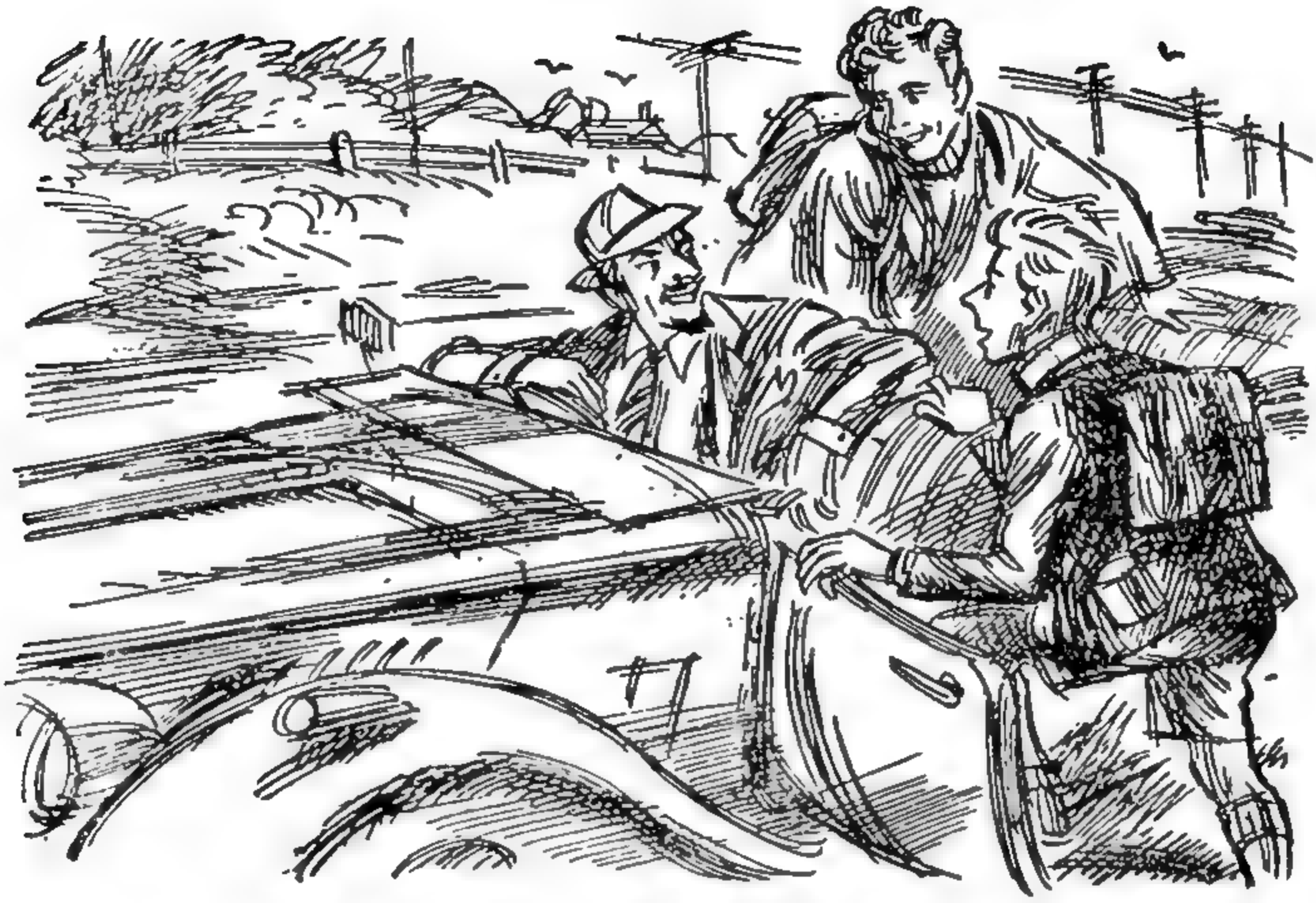
Fairly soon we arrived at Sudbury. "Here's where I stop," he said.

We walked for three miles out of Sudbury. Then a farmer gave us a lift for a couple of miles and immediately afterwards we had a stroke of luck—a lady who is a great friend of Aunt Betty stopped her car and took us right into Derby, where she stood us a jolly good lunch at the Midland Hotel.

"Send me a postcard from Paris," she cried as we said goodbye to her.

We'd some difficulty in finding our way out of the town and were tempted to take a bus; but we had decided only to do this in an emergency.

Leicester was to be our next objective, or anywhere definitely going south towards London. We were lucky, because just at a crossroads in Derby the red lights came on, and I asked the driver of an empty van if we were on the right road. He said he was going that way and in a jiffy we were in the van. He didn't talk much, and the old vehicle was pretty shaky, but he got us well out of the town and put us down on the road between Loughborough and Mountsorrel at a spot where he had to turn off. It was then about three o'clock, and once



"Out in search of adventure, eh?" he asked.

again we trudged on, thinking how lucky we'd been up to date.

It must have been quite an hour's walk on with no offer of a lift when a magnificent high-powered sports car slowed down right by us to let a horse and cart cross the road. Bobby, who is always an optimist and looks rather appealing, put his arm up, I following, when to our astonishment we saw the driver was none other than the man with the beard whom we'd seen in the other car. He pulled up. "What do you want, boys?" His voice sounded more pleasant than I had expected.

"We are making our way to London, hitch-hiking, and if you could give us a lift any of the way towards Leicester we'd be awfully pleased." He hesitated a moment, and then he said to me: "Get in the other side by me, and you," turning to Bobby, "get in at the back."

We were off almost before I could say "Thank you."

"That's O.K.," he said. "Out in search of adventure, eh?"

I said, "Yes, sir. In fact with a bit of luck we hope to cross the Channel."

He seemed greatly struck by that. "Do you, indeed?" he said, and the speed of the car dropped quite a lot while he seemed to consider.

"That's very interesting," he said. "Well, my name's Turpin—Major Turpin—it's just possible that I might be able to help you to do it—that is, if you will help me."

"By jove, sir," he exclaimed. "That would be absolutely wonderful." But he wouldn't answer our questions, saying merely: "I've a problem to think out. We'll go on to Bedford and have tea there—we'll talk it over then."

In Bedford we were soon enjoying a marvellous tea at the Bridge Hotel. At first Major Turpin would talk only about ourselves, where we had come from and what we meant to do. At last he said: "Well, you seem a couple of enterprising lads and I'm going to come clean. I'm a British agent—a secret agent, and at this moment I can do with your help. You won't have heard of me, of course, but come under my orders and I'll get you to France quicker than you could ever imagine. Are you game?"

Bobby piped up: "You're not pulling our leg, sir, are you?"

Major Turpin darted at him a terrible look. "Good heavens, no!" he cried. "But I'd better say no more."

"Oh, go on, sir," I said. "If you get us to France we'll be awfully grateful."

"Right! Now, first—the risk. You take no risk if you keep absolute silence, except to each other and me. I am often watched, but at this very moment my assistant is on guard and we're not being watched now. No one is going to connect you with me and your lives will not be endangered. I wouldn't embroil you if I thought there was much risk. But you must promise obedience, and absolute silence. Not a word to a soul!"

I must say it sounds pretty fishy as I write it down, and I could see Bobby looking at me a bit doubtfully. But there

was something very convincing in his manner, and at the word France we had both pricked up our ears.

"You mean you can get us to France?" said Bobby.

"You bet I can—we're all going," said Major Turpin; "that is, if you're game to lend a hand. Now take your time, don't decide yet. But just remember this: Life is sometimes stranger than fiction. Secret agents *do* exist, and sometimes they can get into jams. When they do—and I'm in one now—they have the right to call on loyal citizens for help. You two kids are a godsend. You're just what we need. Think it over, and when I come back give me your answer."

It was, of course, a foregone conclusion that we should agree. We were frightfully excited to know what it was all about. We waited an interminable time, and wondered if Major Turpin had gone away. Suddenly he reappeared with another man.

"Your lives will not be endangered."

A jolly-looking man with a handlebar moustache.

"This is my friend, Simpson," he said. "Well, have you considered my suggestion?"

Bobby looked at me and I answered that we certainly agreed.

"Then shake hands with Simpson—he is my right-hand man, and a wonderful chap in a tight corner. He may have to give you instructions; if he does, you must carry them out."

We shook hands. Simpson was a rather jolly-looking youngish man with a magnificent handlebar moustache. He looked a bit like a R.A.F. officer in civilian clothes. He said he was pleased to meet us and called us 'stout fellahs.' He then left.

"Now, boys," said Major Turpin, "I'm going to give you some money. You will need it, for you have to go by train to Dover. You can stay tonight at the Bolsover Hotel, Victoria. Take a double room, and have a meal outside the hotel at any little restaurant and tomorrow take two second-class tickets for train and boat to Calais. Take the first morning boat train. On the train, which is, of course, a corridor, you will see either me or Simpson. Do not appear to recognize us, but when you see one or other of us make a signal to you, follow down the corridor.

"If we don't either of us turn up, it will be because we can't get to you. Go ahead to Dover, wait there a night and meet the train the following morning. Again, do not recognize either of us, but follow discreetly.

"If you go to the station now you'll catch a fast train to

London and you can get a bus to Victoria; the Bolsover Hotel is by the station. If you see either of us, there must be no recognition. Now, goodbye and good luck to us all."

He produced two wads of ten one-pound notes, which he gave to each of us, and waved us away. We walked out of the hotel and soon found the station. We got our tickets and in ten minutes in came the train. We got seats in a carriage with only one old woman sitting in the far corner.

"Gosh," said Bobby to me, "if it's going to be like this for the next fortnight we'll have something pretty good to remember all our lives!"

We'd got papers but were too excited to read them, and chatted away until we got to London.

Bobby had been in London once before with his parents, but I never had. We got outside the station and I saw a policeman. At once he told us the bus to get, and, much excited, we arrived at Victoria Station. We found the Bolsover Hotel with ease, and were rather overcome with its grandeur. I thought Bobby's manner a bit more grand than mine, and told him to ask for a double room for the night. A clerk looked a little superciliously at us. "I'm afraid we have no double room under thirty-eight and sixpence, which includes breakfast."

Bobby looked aghast, but, remembering the money we'd been given and our instructions, I said airily: "Oh, that's quite all right."

"You have no luggage, sir, so if I give you a room I fear I must ask you to pay in advance."

"Certainly," I said, and took out two one-pound notes from my bundle of ten.

The man's manner changed. He asked us to register, and we were shown up to a most splendid room, on the fourth floor. I'd never been in a lift in my life before.

When we were left alone, Bobby said: "What on earth did you spend all that money for? We could have slept in a waiting room."

I said because we had been told to go there. Perhaps

"I fear I must ask you to pay in advance."

Major Turpin might want to get into contact with us there.

We unpacked—not that there was much to do—had a wash-up and decided to go out and eat something. Both of us were tired and not very hungry, so we only went into the refreshment room in the station and had some tea and sandwiches. There's a newsreel on the station, and we decided we could well afford to celebrate and take the cheapest seats and spend an hour there. There was a jolly good cartoon, a Walt Disney that made us laugh a lot, an exciting sort of documentary film about a gang of crooks getting forged notes into circulation, which made us laugh because it all seemed so obvious. Then we went up to bed. I asked that we should be called at seven-thirty. Our train was not until nine-thirty, but I wanted to have a good look at the passengers getting on to the platform.

After breakfast we walked straight from the hotel to the station through a passage we hadn't found the night before.

He said quietly: "Take this, it's very important."

I suppose from the looks of the hotel porters we ought to have tipped, but we'd done all our own carrying, so why should we?

I had a notebook and added up everything we paid, and kept the hotel bill to show Major Turpin. Then we bought our second-class tickets to Calais. We got corner seats next the corridor, because we were so early, and a couple of papers, and then waited, watching. Time went on and on and at last we took our seats and a minute or two afterwards the train moved off. Bobby looked at me and I at him, and we both knew the other was a bit worried, as neither the Major nor Simpson had turned up. Just as we passed Orpington I saw, to my astonishment and relief, Major Turpin pass the window. I waited a moment and then said to Bobby: "Come on out, let's stretch our legs."

We walked out of the compartment. I could see the Major

at the far end of the coach. There were a few people standing between us.

He took no notice whatever of us, but as we approached Sevenoaks he gave a flicker of his folded paper as if to suggest that we should join him. I did not know that just outside Sevenoaks is a long tunnel and the passage rather dim. It was as we entered the tunnel that we got up to him. There was no one near. He said quietly: "Take this. It's very important."

He handed me a small package the size of a pullet's first egg.

"Now keep your head. There is nothing for you to be alarmed about. The package I have given you feels like an egg. And it is an egg—a child's wooden Easter egg. But inside it, folded up tight, is a frightfully important document on which the safety of many Englishmen depends. If an inkling of the contents becomes public, the consequences will be grim. You are much less likely to be searched carefully than myself—nobody will take *you* for an agent—and I have entrusted the document to you. Hide it well."

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Now as to the present: when we get out of the tunnel Simpson will give you each a book. Do not open them—carry them in your hands and give them back to *me* when you give me the document. He will also change your notes into francs. If you don't see me on the boat you must take the train to Paris. There open the document. You will take off the first cover and find on the second wrapping an address in Paris of a flat. There will be a Monsieur Vincent at that address—he does not leave the flat during the daytime, and to him you must pass the document and the books. He will give you some money, and your job will be over until I see you again. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I said.

"Yes," said Bobby.

"Good. Well, boys, when this little job is done"—and I could feel his breath on my ear as he stooped over me in the

darkness—"I think I can promise you that you'll each find on your breakfast table one fine morning a note of thanks from the Prime Minister himself!"

"Oh, you mustn't bother about that," I said politely, and hoped he wouldn't take me literally. I can tell you my heart was thumping.

"Now, off you go," he said. "We're coming out of the tunnel."

We went back to our seats and sat down, not liking to say a word in front of the other occupants of the carriage. Ten minutes afterwards, while I was reading my paper and Bobby watching the corridor, he nudged me and we went out again as he had seen Simpson. He greeted us cheerily: "Come and have some coffee." He led us along to the restaurant car. There we got a table to ourselves. Having ordered coffee for all of us, he opened a bag and gave us each a book—both had their paper wrappers and were obviously books of adventure. He then asked me what money we had left over from the £20 that Turpin had given us. I showed him our account. Expenses from Bedford to London—bus fares—supper and our tickets to Calais.

"Jolly good show!" he said. "You're doing well, chaps!"

We then produced the balance of Major Turpin's money. Simpson explained that when we passed through the Customs Offices on the way to the ship we should be asked to declare our money and that we should then of course do so.

"What happens if they ask about the document?" said Bobby suddenly.

"Shh!" said Simpson. "My dear man, they know nothing about that. They won't." He then gave us the address of a small hotel to stay in while in Paris. Finally he told us that we could pack the books in our knapsacks should we not contact Major Turpin on the boat.

All this while I had the document in my trouser pocket. I perpetually thought of it and its importance, and wondered what I'd say if I was searched at the Customs. I determined to take no risk.

"Funny our having to hold these books," said Bobby.

I walked along to a lavatory, taking my knapsack. I opened the tin of petroleum jelly, which was quite a large one, as it was for us both. I dug out a good bit, put the packet in, covered it over with the jelly, throwing away what I could not get into the pot. There, labelled 'ointment,' I felt my document was safe. I rejoined Bobby.

We arrived at Dover Harbour Station. The train was not crowded and, having only our knapsacks and no luggage to carry but our papers and books, we hurried through a door labelled 'Passports.' We got in almost at the head of the queue. My heart was beating a bit hard as I felt something exciting might happen. I handed my passport in.

"What money have you got?" I was asked.

We told him promptly, and to my relief we were passed on. It was raining a bit, but not rough, and we were soon by the gangway and on to the boat.

We went to the second-class part of the boat and it was jolly comfortable. We got two seats together in a kind of lounge, and waited for the Major.

"It's all a bit odd, isn't it?" Bobby said in a low voice.

"Yes," I answered. "The more I think of it the more strange it seems to me. I can't make out why Simpson didn't come from Derby to Bedford in the same car with Major Turpin."

"Perhaps he drove the first car we saw the Major driving that morning."

"That may be it. Anyway," I said, "they seem to avoid appearing both at the same time."

"Funny our having to hold these books and not open them," said Bobby. "Gosh, I think some of these pages are stuck together. What do you say we have a peep?"

"No," I said. "They trust us not to look. Maybe there are secret messages stuck in between the pages and the less we know about them the better. That's Secret Service principle number one."

"But it's awfully dull not knowing. Hullo! we're off."

There was a hoot, and before long we were well out to sea. Quite calm, but a dispiriting drizzle. We waited impatiently for Major Turpin or Simpson, but nothing happened. We had chosen prominent seats where anyone could see us. I rather wanted to walk about and see things, for it was my first time on a ship. We decided to take it in turns.

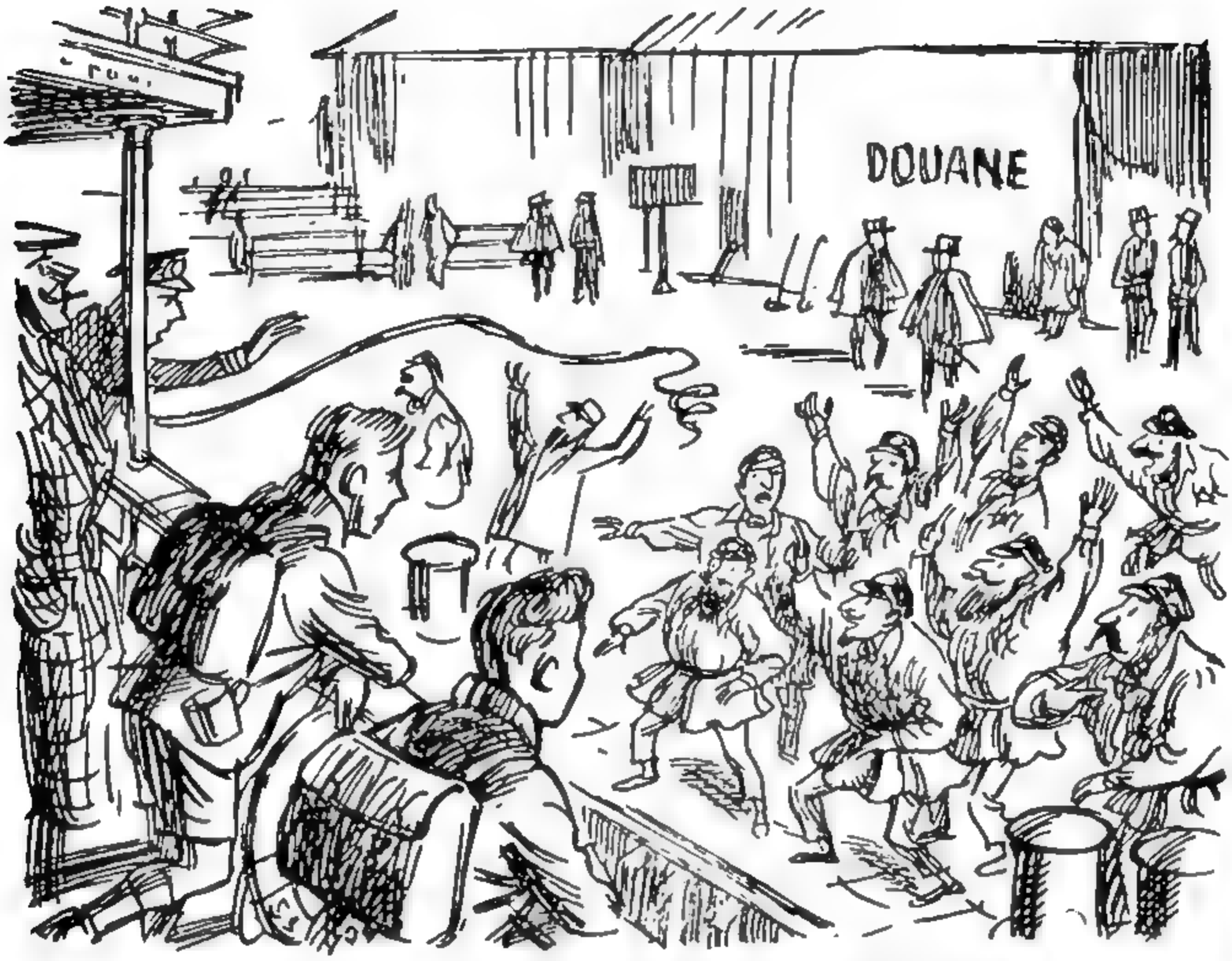
I strolled about for ten minutes and then came back. There hadn't been a sign of either the Major or Simpson.

This was a bit alarming. When the ship docked at Calais we queued up at the gangway.

There was a horde of porters on the quay waiting to carry our baggage and trying to catch our eye. But, of course, Bobby and I carried our own.

The Customs people took one look at us and then gave a jerk with their thumbs, meaning we were all right. They did not even glance at our knapsacks.

Feeling quite cockahoop, we took third-class tickets and



There was a horde of porters on the quay.

the next train to Paris. The seats were hard but we got corners.

We got there between six and seven o'clock. Simpson had stressed that we must put up at a particular hotel close to the Nord Station, "so that if anything goes wrong we shan't lose touch with you," and, of course, we followed his instructions.

A man from Cook's was awfully decent, and showed us exactly where the hotel was. We booked a double room, paid two hundred francs, and were taken up a long staircase to the fifth floor, where we found a quite clean room with two beds and running water, hot and cold. The cold was certainly colder than the hot, but not much. Having locked our door we unpacked the document, wiped it and took off the first wrapper. The address on it was typed: Monsieur Vincent, 10, Rue Volney, Paris. We placed our books in the bottom of our knapsacks and I wrapped up the document

I suppose we looked awfully English.

and placed that also in my knapsack, covering it with the newspaper I had brought from London.

There was a cupboard in the room with a key. On a shelf of this we placed the knapsack. Bobby locked the door, and put the key in his pocket.

We thought we'd try to find our way to the Rue Volney, so that in the morning we could walk there quickly.

The proprietor of our hotel told us it was close to the Opéra. Fortunately my French is not too bad, though I'd never really spoken much except to one master at Uttoxeter, who was keen on French conversation.

There was a café outside our hotel with little tables along the street pavement. It had stopped raining and there were strong lights. It looked rather gay, and there were plenty of people there. I took a menu, and found we could get an omelette quite cheap, so we ordered one.

People stared a good deal at us, but then they generally did. I think because Bobby had very red gold hair—mine's much more fair—I suppose we looked awfully English.

The omelette was delicious, and, having paid and got directions from the proprietor, we started off straight down the Rue Lafayette. It took us three-quarters of an hour to find 10, Rue Volney. Having done so, we thought we might as well ask whether Monsieur Vincent was in, and if so ask him if we should come tomorrow, or if he would come back with us to the hotel.

There was a bell by the side of the door of No. 10, and a *concièrge* came out. I asked, as well as I could, if Monsieur Vincent was *chez lui*. The man looked astonished, and then burst into voluble French. Had we not heard that Monsieur Vincent had been arrested that day by the police and taken away?

"*Arrêté?*" we gasped. "*Par des gendarmes?*"

"*Oui, oui!*"

We shot off, leaving the concièrge flinging his arms about and shouting.

He asked who we were, but I scented danger—I turned to Bobby.

"Come on. We've got to bolt."

We shot off, leaving the *concièrge* flinging his arms about and shouting: "*Voleurs! Criminels! Félons!*" behind us.

At the Place de l'Opéra we stopped.

"What's all the hurry?" asked Bobby.

I was thinking furiously and said: "Come on. We've got to get to our hotel quick!"

Half walking, half

running, we got back to our hotel in about twenty minutes.

We got upstairs. We let ourselves into our bedroom.

"Bobby," I said, "we must open the document. We've been had!"

"Yes," answered Bobby. "Pawns, I think, is the word."

Bobby hunted for the key of the wardrobe and found—a hole in his pocket. That key was gone. Not stolen, but yet gone. We were for a moment in despair.

"That *concièrge* will go straight to the police," I said. "A description of us might be broadcast, and we are pretty obvious with no disguise."

In my belt was a knife with all sorts of scout gadgets. I can say we really laughed when in almost a moment I picked that lock and saw our knapsacks safe and sound. Eagerly I tore off the next cover with the address off the packet. Sure enough, there was a wooden Easter egg, blue with a yellow chicken painted on. It was of the type that comes apart when you pull both ends. We did so, and THEN out fell—not a closely written document—but a huge, glittering, white diamond!

"Crikey!" said Bobby.

I think we both felt weak at the knees, for we sat down on the bed and just stared at the thing in astonishment.

Then we talked and talked for about ten minutes before we remembered the books.

We dived back to the wardrobe for them.

They opened correctly. No inscriptions. Nothing—*but* many pages were stuck together—indeed half and more of the books were gone. Carefully I opened up two pages stuck together. There between these pages was a crisp ten-pound note.

Bobby unstuck two of his—this time it was £5!

At least a couple of hundred pages in both books were stuck together like this!

All this made us feel very windy indeed.

If the police were informed by the *concièrge* that we two had called for Monsieur Vincent we should obviously be

connected in some way with his crime. As English schoolboys we were conspicuous and easy to describe. Police would come and find us in possession of an enormous diamond and masses of money of which we could give only a very queer account, and we felt our French was not up to elaborate explanations!

"The best thing we can do is to go first thing in the morning with the diamond and books to the British Embassy," I said. "Uncle Frank said in any trouble always go to the most important people possible. Moreover, they can talk English."

Bobby agreed, and we went to bed. I can't say I slept very well, tired as I was. I kept dreaming the door was opening and that the police were coming in, or, worse still, a ferocious Major Turpin and Simpson with his *bonhomie* all gone. Bobby slept like a log, only I suppose logs don't snore.

We were both awake by seven, and at eight decided to pay our bill and have a light breakfast at a nearby café; but when we reached the hall I remembered that I hadn't packed my toothpaste and ran back for it, leaving Bobby to settle up with the cashier.

My toothpaste had fallen down behind a sort of cabinet holding the wash basin and it took me some time to fish it out. I had nearly reached the bottom of the stairs again and was making two steps at a time for the hall when I heard an English voice that sounded pretty familiar, and it was saying: "Good morning, Bobby, where's your pal?"

I just managed to stop my rush into the entrance hall, where they were standing. The staircase wall hid me, but they were only about five feet away.

I heard Bobby's voice, very thin, saying: "Oh, hallo, Major Turpin," and knew that if he was feeling anything like myself he was getting on to being paralysed with alarm.

I managed to turn in my tracks, however, and went crawling back up the stairs with such strength as I had.

As I reached the first floor my heart gave another lurch, for there on the landing stood old Handlebars himself.

There on the landing stood old Handlebars himself.

"Good show, old chap!" he was saying. "Good show! 'Gratulations, in fact." He was grinning cordially enough, but there was a nasty glitter in his eye.

"Nearly missed you, old man," he added. "Too bad if we had. But we haven't. The chief was quite nervous about you," and he shepherded me before him down the stairs.

"Ha, our other young friend!" cried Turpin, on seeing me emerge. "I think we can congratulate ourselves on our mutual successes. I am informed that the document is safe." He patted Bobby's shoulder almost benignly.

Even then I noticed Bobby's chest was heaving in a funny way—as though he'd done a mile in five minutes. He looked perfectly ghastly.

Then I noticed that I, too, was having difficulty with my breathing, and no doubt I looked just as white as he did. Talk about feeling groggy!

At that moment I hadn't the faintest idea of what we were going to do or say. The diamond was in my pocket, the packet obviously unsealed. The books with their pages unstuck and their crooked notes exposed lay in my knapsack. There were the two crooks, looking pretty dangerous I can tell you, and there were we with their horrid secret in our pockets, so to speak, and the whole of Paris casually moving around us and separated from us by reason of its foreign tongue. No doubt the crooks could talk French far better than we could, and what could we say to a French crowd if the crooks started to call *us* the thieves!

To make things worse, old Handlebars had laid hold of my arm in careless friendly style, and I could feel his fingers pressing into my biceps as though he had no intention of ever letting go again.

"I think, boys, we'd better go along to my flat and have breakfast. What do you say?" Major Turpin smiled invitingly, and I thought if they *do* get us into their private hide-out we'll never escape alive: we know too much. Bobby was licking his lips, and an eyelid was fluttering. No—he was trying to wink—he was signalling to me!

Of course it takes much longer to write all this than the few seconds that were actually passing. I knew in a flash that Bobby was nerving himself for something, and I tried to be ready for what might come. It came at once.

Bobby stepped forward almost jauntily and was holding the stage.

"You're too late, Major Turpin!" he cried. He sounded almost jubilant. "Your game's up, and we all know you're crooks! What's more—I've got the diamond and that's the last you'll see of it!" And with a challenging wink at Handlebars, he dived through the hotel door, skidded down the steps, and started sprinting like mad down the street.

Of course, the pair of them were after him like a flash. At one moment there was Handlebars clinging to me like a twelve-stone octopus; the next, there was nobody in the hall but myself and the goggling cashier.

Bobby had deliberately drawn them off, for he knew that the diamond, of course, was in *my* pocket. So out I shot while the going was good, and started off in the opposite direction. But I couldn't resist a backward glance to see how Bobby was doing. He had a twenty-yard start on our enemies, who were already about thirty yards away and going full out.

At that moment a taxi cruised by. It was moving in the direction of the runners. On impulse, I signalled to it to stop. I got in, still watching the chase, and noticed to my renewed alarm that Turpin was making violent signs to Handlebars to go back. His meaning was only too clear to me. They had come to their senses! One of them was to chase me, while the other chased Bobby!

French taxis are pretty small and you can't hide in the cushions, so I was greatly relieved when Handlebars went tearing past the taxi, back into the hotel, without as much as a glance in my direction.

Now began a most nerve-racking conversation with the driver.

"Follow those two in front," I said, "*mais pas rapidement*. Slowly, keep them in sight. Don't pass them."

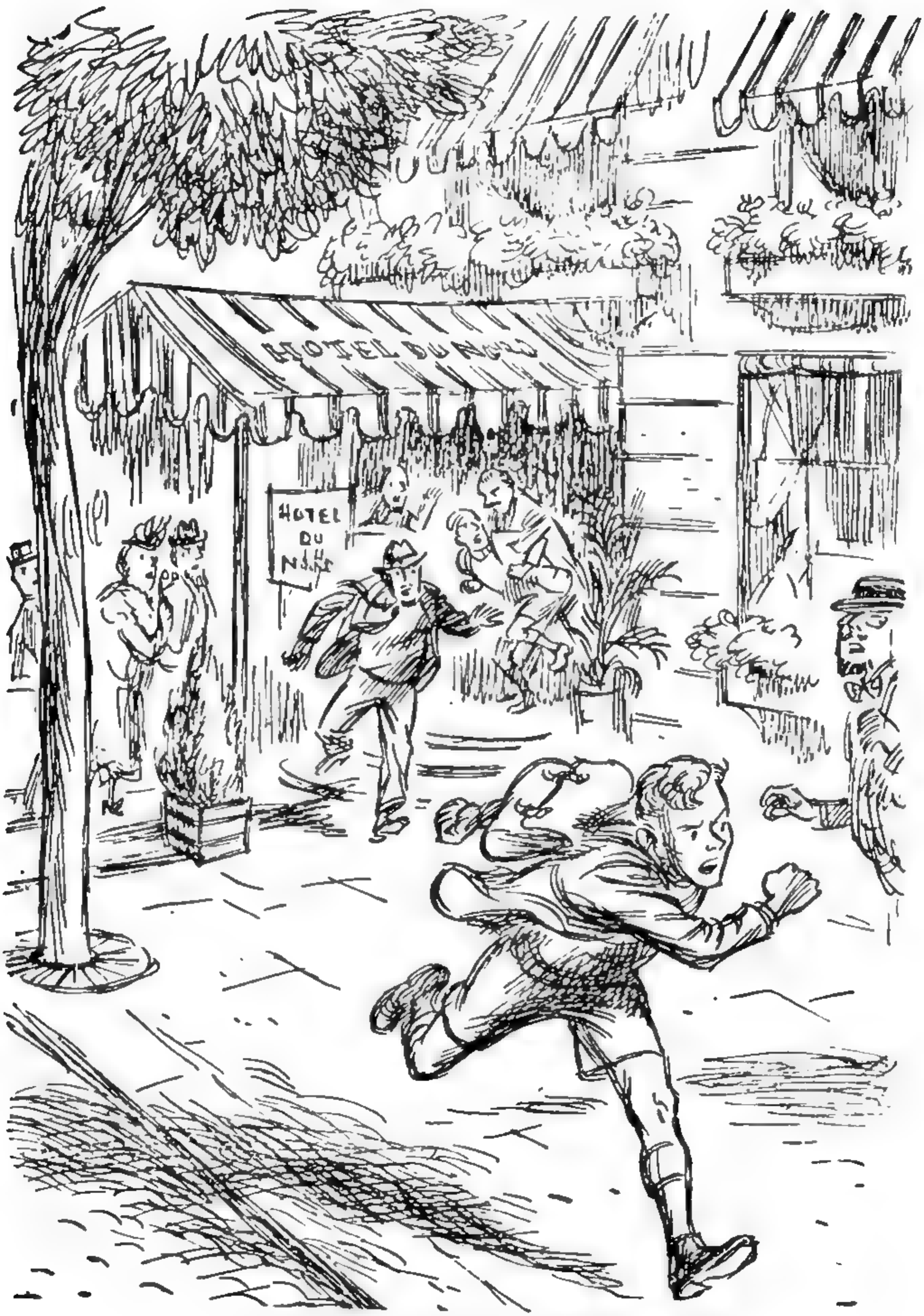
I couldn't understand his French, which was very excited, so I concentrated hard on making him understand mine. I repeated, over and over again, "*Embassade Britannique, monsieur!* We want to go to the British Embassy!"

"*Oui, oui*," said the driver. "*L'Embassade de la Grande Bretagne*, but certainly!" He made an airy gesture.

Then, sweating with effort, I said to him firmly: "The young man who runs away is my——" I wanted to say 'my friend,' but in my excitement could only say '*mon fils*' (my son)—that is to say," I added hastily, "*mon frère*" (my brother).

"The young man is my brother. He is in danger. We must get to the British Embassy at once. Can you aid us? Can you save him?"

That taximan was a miracle. His name is George (pronounced, and spelt, the French way, of course) and today he is our friend.



The pair of them were after him like a flash.

At that moment we saw the gun in his hand.

There we were, purring along behind the chase, while I laboured to explain and George laboured to understand. I think he got the idea that we were honest people in trouble with the police, and from that moment he was on our side. A jet of French poured from him of which I could understand only "*L'Embassade de la Grande Bretagne*" and "*tous les deux!*" and many vigorous nods of the head. Then he stretched over one arm to the back of the car, thumped the handle of the door and said unexpectedly: "*Attention!* Ven I say: 'O-pen'—o-pen!"

"*Oui, oui,*" I said. "*Prêt!*"

The car shot forward. In a few moments it was level with Turpin, past him; level with Bobby.

"Bobby! Bobby!" I shouted. He looked all in, but he heard me.

About twenty yards ahead of Bobby we stopped.

"O-pen!" cried George briskly.

I opened the door at once.

"Pull heem een!" said George. His words just nerved me to do the right thing. Bobby, at the point of collapsing, staggered against the door. I caught his arm and hauled with all my strength. In a moment he was kneeling on the floor of the little car, too done to move, his feet still outside. The car accelerated quickly, but not quite quickly enough. The large body of Major Turpin, like a corpse blown upon us by an explosion, had hurtled in on top of us, badly winded but dangerous as ever, sitting more or less on top of Bobby.

George, alertly aware of what had happened but taking no action, was doing the usual forty miles an hour along the boulevards.

Major Turpin raised an arm to wipe the nasty fleck of foam from his mouth. At that moment we saw the gun in his hand. At least, *I* saw it, since it was waved at me—and *George* saw it in the little mirror above his head.

"Well, brats," said the Major, "the next move is with me!"

What the next move was to be we did not learn. The car had slackened pace to a mere thirty miles an hour. George had twisted momentarily towards us. His wiry black arm swept over the back of his seat. There was a slight, almost imperceptible, thud from the region of the Major's head and the savage look faded from his face. Major Turpin was looking very sleepy. His mouth fell open, his eyes closed, and he lurched sideways as the taxi swung round a corner.

Bobby heaved himself to the surface and sat down beside me on the seat, leaving the Major on the floor. I picked up his gun.

"Eef he moves, heet heem a-gen vis zees!" said George, and chucked over to us a small truncheon-like instrument made of black rubber. As he later explained, a taximan's life is full of surprises and it is wise to take certain precautions.

Well, in less than five minutes we drew up at a doorway

George took his head and I took his feet.

over which drooped the Union Jack. Was I glad to see it!

Bobby kept ringing the bell and dancing with impatience while George and I pulled the Major from the car. George took his head, I took his feet, and together we carried him into the *Embassade de la Grande Bretagne*. At least, it should have been like that, but, of course, they wouldn't let us carry him in until we had done a terrific amount of explaining. In fact, I had to leave him, very sick, on the doorstep with George and Bobby, and a couple of gendarmes who divided their time between asking questions and keeping back the crowd. Bobby insisted on staying on guard: "I want to make sure he doesn't wriggle out of this. You do the explaining. You've got the diamond."

Well, my first thought was to ask to see Sir Gladwin Jebb. They told me he was in conference.

They said I could see one of the Secretaries.

"I would rather see the Ambassador himself," I said. But the man smiled and was gone.

He came back in about fifteen minutes and said: "Mr. Guthrie will see you now."

I was taken to a gorgeous room, where sitting at a desk facing me sat a pleasant-looking blond man with merry eyes and a cheery way of speaking.

I couldn't help saying: "I'm jolly glad to meet another Englishman, sir, because I and my friend downstairs have got mixed up with international crooks. In fact," I said, "I've got their diamond and their money, and we want to get quit of it all."

When Mr. Guthrie roared with laughter I knew he was laughing at me, but I was too happy to care.

"That sounds right up my street," he said. "My wife will wear the diamond and I'll spend the money!"

I took out my package and unwrapped the stone and put it in front of him. He stopped laughing at once.

"That certainly *is* a diamond," he cried. "I've never seen anything like it. How on earth did you get this?"

So I told him the whole story as fast as I could and said: "You'd better do something quickly about Bobby and Major Turpin and our taximan, for it's nearly an hour since I left them on your doorstep. If I know Major Turpin, he has probably persuaded the gendarmes to arrest Bobby by this time."

But no such calamity had occurred.

To cut it short, Bobby and I were actually introduced next day to His Excellency the Ambassador himself, and had to tell our story all over again while we drank ginger-ale and tried an *apéritif*. And Mr. Guthrie took us to lunch (Bobby had snails), and to the Eiffel Tower and to ice-cream at Rageneau's. Later we took George and his wife to dinner at the 'Rallye,' and they took us to Luna Park, which is a sort of permanent fair on the outskirts of Paris, all very gay. But the whole of that first day we spent answering the endless questions of police officials with notebooks, very exciting at

Mr. Guthrie roared with laughter.

first but very boring soon. You can imagine it was all pretty complicated. We were tired that night, but it was a wonderful start to a wonderful holiday.

Major Turpin was extradited and is now in prison. Handlebars, they haven't caught yet.

Uncle Frank won his bet, of course, with Bobby's father, and as soon as he had heard our story (our letter was twelve pages long) he sent us some money "to keep us out of further mischief" and said we'd better come home at once. But the Embassy had already loaned us thirty pounds as Distressed Nationals—the police having taken away the Turpin notes. And on that we went to the South of France and swam a lot and had *bouillabaisse*. If you don't know what that means, why not try a holiday like ours and find out? As Uncle Frank says: "You can usually get what you want if you want it enough!" And, in any case, it's fun to try.

I. O. EVANS

★

Danger in Space

"CADET Hardy, Sir, reporting for duty!" Dick saluted as he entered the control-room of the rocket-ship *Thunderbird* on its launching ramp at London's Spaceport.

"Glad to have you with us, Hardy." Space-Lieutenant Ramsay acknowledged the salute with a friendly wave of his hand. "Now sit down—move those star-charts out of the way—and let me tell you about our work. I expect you're rather disappointed, aren't you, at being posted to meteor patrol instead of one of the big interplanetary ships?"

Dick reddened. He had, in fact, felt something of the sort, for *Thunderbird* looked insignificant compared with the great space-liners nearby.

"But it's the best introduction to spacemanship," Ramsay explained. "Most of the Space Marshals started in the patrol. There's only four of us on board, so we have to share all the work between us, from plotting meteor-swarms with the radar to washing-up—and washing-up in free fall is no joke. In the big ships you'd have one special duty, and stick to that—astrogation or rocketry, or jollying the passengers along.

"You get much more experience with us and the discipline isn't so strict. When you're on duty here, you're on duty, and no mistake; but in between we're just fellow-space-

men and friends. We're not on duty now, Dick, so you can begin by calling me 'Skipper' if you like."

"Thank you, Sir—I mean, Skipper," Dick replied rather awkwardly.

"And remember this, Dick, when you hear the cadets from the big ships talking about their adventures on Mars—three parts of them are quite untrue, no doubt—just you smile politely, and don't be rude enough to remind them that without the meteor-patrol their interplanetary space-liners would never dare leave earth. Once they're well in space they can veer out of the ecliptic to get away from the meteor swarms, but within the moon's orbit these wretched things get all over the place, and we have to spot them in time and flash a warning to Co-ordination Centre down on earth, so that the big space-liners can come in. You know how we detect the things, of course?"

"By radar, Skipper? And doppler?"

"Yes—and I know you qualified in both. But—and first let me warn you, Dick, that this is Top Secret. Tell me, can you use a mine-detector?"

"Yes, Sir—Skipper—and I qualified in that, too. But we never knew what it was for."

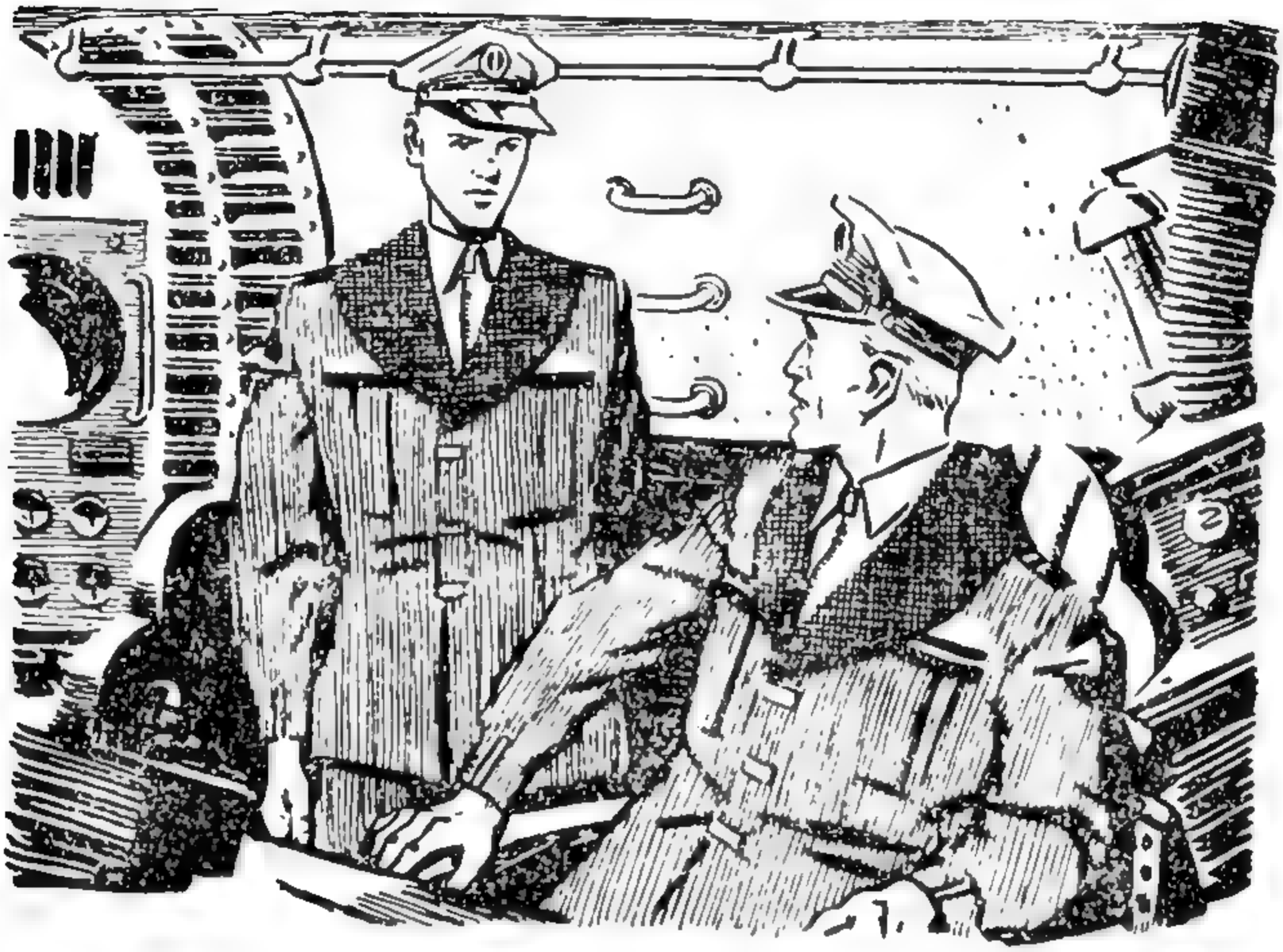
"Well now I'm going to tell you something that will astonish you—out here in space there are times when the radar and doppler won't work."

Dick gasped with surprise.

"Yes—and it's a thing that mustn't leak out, for if the public knew that radar can't always be trusted, who'd venture on a space-ship? But there are magnetic storms—something to do with the sunspots, I'm told—when the radar and doppler simply black out. Then we have to use the Magnetic Detector—it acts like a mine detector, only more so. It will pick up radiations from a nickel-steel meteor thousands of miles away."

"What about the stone meteors, Skipper? Doesn't it detect them?"

"No. But stone meteors are so few and far between, we



"First let me warn you, Dick, that this is Top Secret."

have to take a chance. It's the nickel-steel meteors that are the real menace—the sky seems full of them. Hullo, boys! All ready to hit space? Meet Dick Hardy, straight up from the Cadet School: Dick, meet Bob Sanderson our pilot, and Murgatroyd, our rocketeer. We've got orders to blast-off tomorrow, so let's make our final check."

Next morning Dick strapped himself down in his place beside the pilot and watched the hand of the control-board clock creep slowly towards the red line which indicated time for blast-off. Before him was the control panel, with the large visiplate screen above. Murgatroyd was down in the stern with his tubes, the Skipper strapped in his seat between the star-charts and the electronic computor. Only ten minutes to go!

"Now, Dick," said the Skipper. "You're off duty during blast-off. It would be cruelty to animals to keep you staring

at gadgets now—the first time you hit space! So relax, and watch the visiplate screen and enjoy the trip. But you can count us out. Space-Pilot Sanderson, you will take your orders from Cadet Hardy!"

"Aye, aye, Sir!" Sanderson grinned at Dick and added, "At your command, Mr. Hardy!"

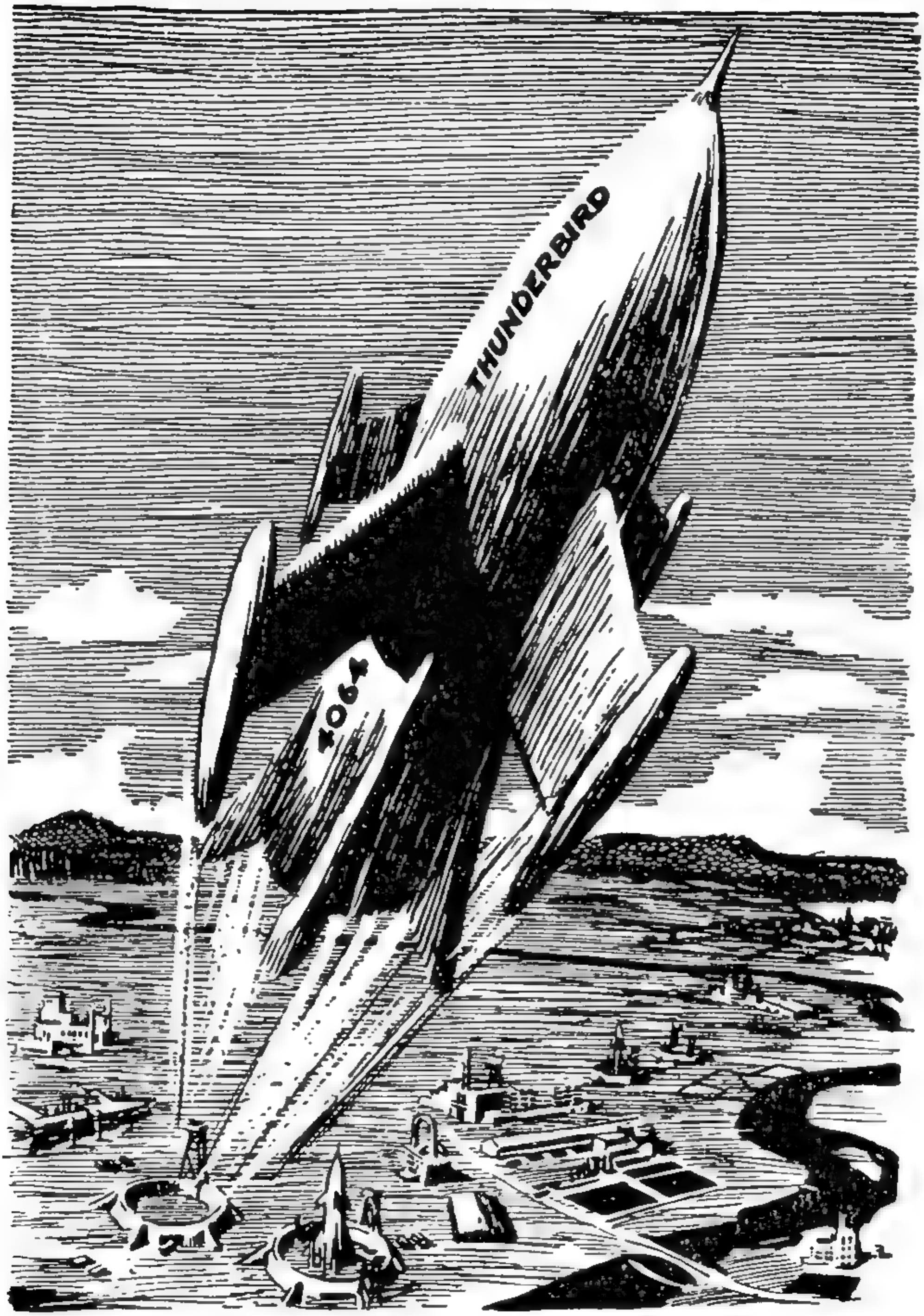
Dick glanced at the clock, waited for the exact second and exclaimed: "Six minutes to blast-off. . . . Five minutes thirty. . . . Five minutes . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . only one minute to blast-off . . . thirty seconds . . . fifteen . . . ten . . . five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . NOW!"

In his excitement he almost shouted the last word. As the ship swept forward, the back of his seat pressed violently against him, and he braced himself to take its thrust as he had learned to do in the centrifuge at the school. Before him the buildings and control-tower of the space-field passed downward, leaving nothing in sight but the clouds and the blue sky as the space-ship leaped aloft.

The pressure grew and grew; Dick's heart throbbed painfully, his head ached, and he gasped for breath. The dial on the control-panel read "4 G", which meant that everybody and everything else on *Thunderbird* were now four times their usual weight. In every second of their flight their speed was increasing by well over sixty miles an hour!

On the visiplate, the clouds had vanished, for *Thunderbird* had swept right through them, and the sky had turned a deep blue. First one by one, the most brilliant of them, and then in countless numbers, the stars appeared, gleaming with a wonderful brightness against the navy blue—no, against the intense black—of the summer sky. But that meant that they were clear of earth's atmosphere—he had hit space!

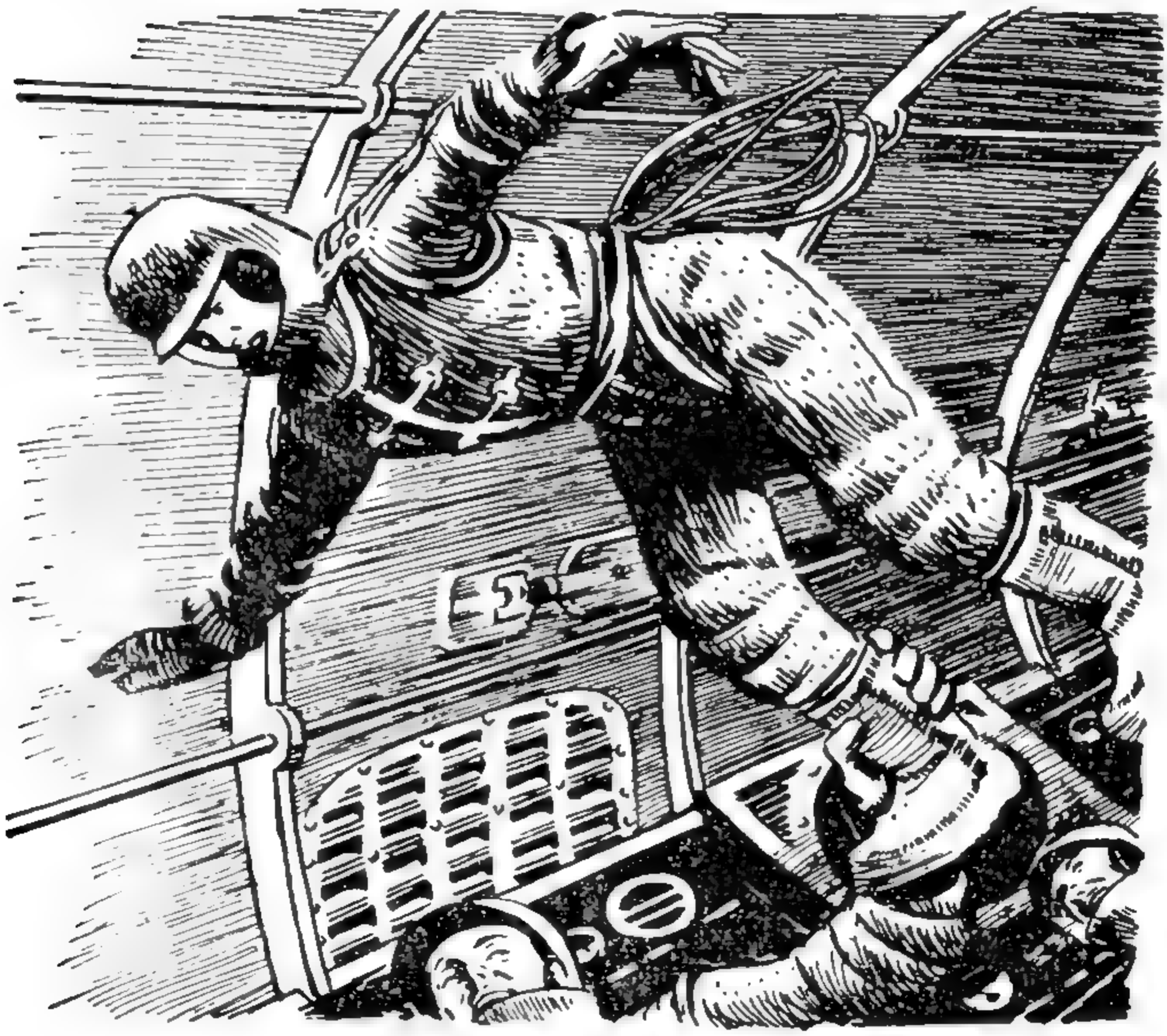
"Attention!" Space-Lieutenant Ramsay spoke sharply. "We are going into free fall; unstrap yourselves, but avoid sudden movements, and keep your crash-helmets on. Dick," he added informally, "go into the main cabin and help Murgatroyd get us a meal. But be careful; you can easily get knocked about in free fall. Bob, get ready to cut your jets."



Blast-off—the space ship leapt aloft into the blue sky.

Sanderson nodded, intently watching the clock-face before him. Suddenly he threw over a switch, and the roar of the rocket-jets died away. Dick knew the dangers of free fall. Cautiously he undid his safety-belt, rather hindered by a queer tendency of his hands to swim up in front of his body, and rose to his feet. Indeed, he rose further than he meant, for he felt himself floating helplessly upwards until a hand grasped his ankle and steadied him.

A queer thing, being in free fall and having no weight! With some difficulty he clambered along the wall into the



He felt himself floating helplessly upwards.

living quarters behind the control-room and amused himself bouncing in various directions, and learning to "land" on floor, ceiling, or roof without injury. Then Murgatroyd came floating out of the engine-room and showed him how to cook and serve a meal and later how to wash up—in free fall, when nothing has any weight. Then, feeling very tired—free fall can be very wearing—he fastened himself down in his bunk. Aroused some hours later, he went on duty.

For his four hours watch he had to keep his attention on the radar, intent for the "blip" of light that indicated a meteor. When he first spotted one, he excitedly reported its bearings to Co-ordinating Centre, but after that it became sheer routine.

Some days later their course took them round the curve of the earth and another object loomed into sight, the globe of the moon. Half of it brilliantly lighted by the sun, and half of it dim and faint. It seemed to rush towards them, so fast did they travel, until it almost filled the sky. Now they were racing down towards it with a speed so great that Dick wondered if the pilot had misjudged his distance and they were about to crash. But no—they swung round it, seeming to his excited mind almost to be skimming its peaks and craters, and then left it behind as they raced earthwards.

"Magnetic storm blowing up," Ramsay announced, when a signal came in from the Centre, "sun-spots giving trouble. So get into your space-suits until it clears."

Obedient to the Interplanetary Code, Dick slipped into his clumsy space-suit and pulled the helmet over his head. But he left the air-valve open; it would close automatically if anything went wrong.

Soon the radar-screen blacked out and the doppler was inactive. Dick concentrated on the Magnetic Detector. Whenever it clicked, he flashed a warning to the Co-ordinating Centre on earth. But mostly it was silent; as to nickel-steel meteors, space about them was reasonably clear.

"Magnetic storm easing," Ramsay announced, and a pattern of "blips" reappeared on the radar. At the sight of

these Sanderson gave a shout of dismay and his hands leaped to the control panel. The reversing tubes in the prow roared into action, checking the ship's speed so suddenly that Dick was hurled out of his seat, the safety-belt round his waist snapping like a thread. Then came a terrific rending crash and he was hurled about even more violently. The click of the closing air-valve on his helmet sounded in his ears.

His head throbbed, and he ached in every limb. All around was darkness, and a nerve-racking silence, while his feeling of weightlessness showed he was in free fall. Bewildered and half-dazed, he stayed motionless trying to collect his wits.

Slowly, as his mind cleared, he recollected the pattern on the radar-screen: it had indicated a large meteor immediately ahead—a meteor which the Magnetic Detector had missed. It must have been a stone meteor; they had hit it head-on and the ship must be wrecked.

But he himself was still alive, and his duty was plain: to report the accident to the Co-ordinating Centre down on earth. For now, he realized, *Thunderbird* was out of control and derelict: itself little better than a meteor, it was a menace to everything in space. Among the tools in his belt-pouch was a flash-light. He pulled it out and pressed the catch.

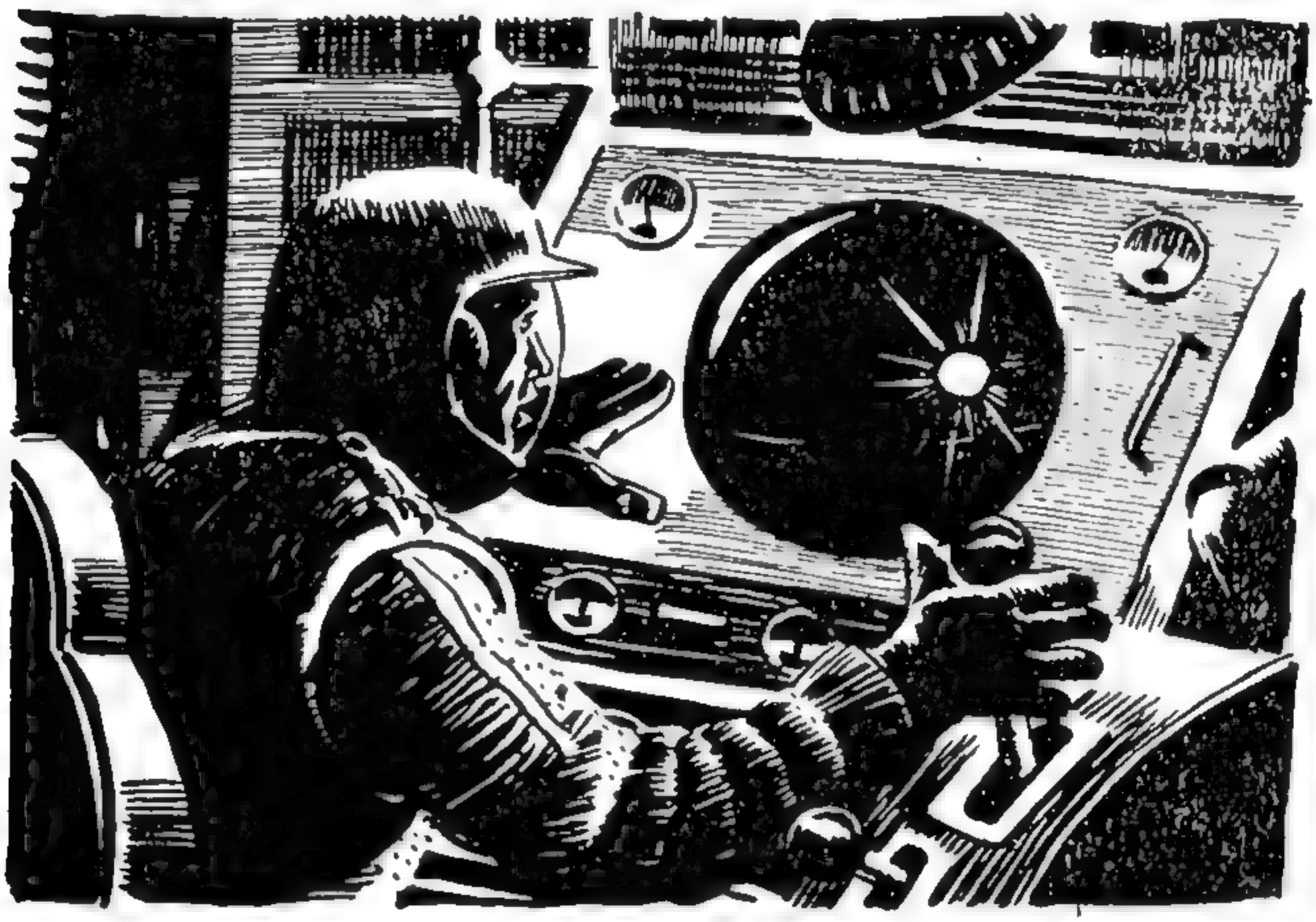
Comforting though the light was, the sight it revealed was horrible. The observation panel had been driven in, and through the gap a great mass of some whitish substance had invaded the ship. The control panel seemed intact, but the radar was still out of action, its screen showing only a pale blur.

On the panel was a small visiplate screen, used occasionally for special scientific work. Dick pressed over its switch, and at once it lighted up. But instead of the usual view of the star-lit sky it too showed only a faint blur of light.

Dick remembered that this small screen could be worked not only with light-rays but with the infra-red. He threw over another switch—and at once, to his great relief, appeared the familiar pattern of the stars.

How had his comrades fared? Moving very cautiously,

Dick dragged himself about the wrecked space-ship till he found their bodies. Dead, he feared, with their space-suits ripped open and their bodies not merely mutilated but frozen hard. Still there was just a chance: the sudden chill of empty space might not kill but only freeze its victim alive, and skilled treatment might revive them. Having carefully placed the bodies in an empty store-bin, he floated into the engine room, finding the frozen body of Murgatroyd, he



Sanderson gave a shout of dismay.

placed it with the others. He padded the three bodies with blankets so that if the ship were again thrown about they would suffer no further harm, and fastened the lid securely down.

Now he must have a meal, and a hot drink; but first he must get a specimen of the strange substance which had wrecked them, so as to analyse it. With a spaceman's axe he chopped off some fragments—the stuff splintered easily—

Dead, he feared, with their space-suits ripped open.

and took them into the living-room. He put them aside, closed the airtight door and switched on the electric heater.

At once the air, which had frozen during the smash, began thawing, was evaporating and filling the room. As soon as air-pressure and temperature were bearable, he took off his space-suit. Having first cleaned himself up, he cooked a hot meal and made some tea. Refreshed, he turned to examine his specimens, but they were gone! Completely vanished—and now he noticed a curious dampness in the air.

He put on his space-suit, turned off the heater, and waited till the air had again frozen. He broke off more fragments

of the substance, but this time he watched them carefully as the temperature rose and the air vaporized. Presently they began to melt—just as the thermometer indicated 32 degrees!

A few tests showed that the liquid which they formed was just water. Then the meteor from which it came must be nothing else but ice!

An ice meteor! Whoever had heard of such a thing? But space was very imperfectly explored and full of surprises. If there were meteors of nickel-steel, and meteors of stone, then why not meteors made of ice? The back-room boys down on earth could settle that.

Certainly this explained much. With the radar out of action, an ice meteor could give no warning of its presence, for it would not affect the Magnetic Detector. The impact when *Thunderbird* had rammed it must not only have melted it but vaporized it—converted it into a cloud of steam—fortunately before it had done more damage than smashing the observation panel. Then, in the bitter cold of space, the steam had condensed around the ship and had frozen her in. Like a boulder in a glacier, *Thunderbird* was embedded in the heart of a solid block of ice. No wonder the radar—and the small visiplate when used with ordinary light—had shown nothing but a vague blur.

After some thought, again putting on his space-suit, Dick ran an electric circuit to the ignitors of the driving rockets in the stern and the reversing rockets in the prow, throttling these down so that they would emit only the feeblest of blasts. Taking the master-switch with him, and swathing himself in blankets, he strapped himself fast. Then, with bated breath, he threw over the switch.

As the rockets at prow and stern began to blast, *Thunderbird* trembled with their pressure, and he wondered anxiously if the hull, already weakened by the collision, could bear this unaccustomed strain.

Suddenly he felt a terrific shock; and at once threw over the switch. As the trembling in the hull ceased, he thrust off

the blankets, floated into the wrecked control room and gazed anxiously around.

Yes, his idea had worked! In the heat of the gases from the rocket-tubes, the centre of the ice had not merely melted, it had been vaporized. The volume and pressure of the steam had increased until the solid ice around had been unable to bear the ever-growing strain. Then the ice-meteor had exploded like a bomb, hurling its fragments far and wide; none of them, he hoped, would be large enough to form a serious menace to space-travel.

Though the meteor was destroyed, his work was not yet done. Making sure that the wireless was still in order, he threw over the special emergency switch, and sent the time-honoured distress-signal flashing through space: S.O.S. . . . S.O.S. . . . S.O.S. . . .

The moment an answering light gleamed on the panel, he switched off the distress signal and plugged in his space-helmet to the set. "Patrol-vessel *Thunderbird* here," he reported. "Cadet Hardy in command. Remainder of crew casualties, and vessel wrecked by collision with an ice-meteor——"

"With a *what*?" came the incredulous interruption.

Dick explained, and almost at once an older and more authoritative voice addressed him. "Your news is of great importance, and we must contact you as soon as possible. Can your ship still drive and steer?"

"She can drive, Sir, but the steering won't be very good."

"A pity. Remain in contact while we decide. Meantime, Space-Cadet Hardy, accept the congratulations of the Service—you have done well."

Presently another voice spoke, the sort of unauthoritative but knowledgeable voice that suggested a back-room boy.

"Mr. Hardy—we have located you, and calculated your speed and course. Please drive at quarter blast for three minutes twenty seconds, and steer as directly towards Regulus, in the Lion star-group, as you can. That should make your path converge on the orbit of the Power Planet, and

The ice-meteor had exploded like a bomb.

efforts will be made to bring you in. Oh, and Mr. Hardy—"

"Yes, Sir?"

"We of the Research staff feel greatly in your debt for this discovery; it has thrown light on some inexplicable accidents during magnetic storms. And now, if I dare make a suggestion, you might try to get some rest."

Dick obeyed these instructions, even that about getting some rest. When he awoke, the Power Planet was visible in the ship's telescope; an artificial satellite used as a space-station, it resembled an immense wheel floating and turning in the depths of space. And even as he watched it, a flash of brilliant light by its side showed that a Space life-boat was being sent to his aid.

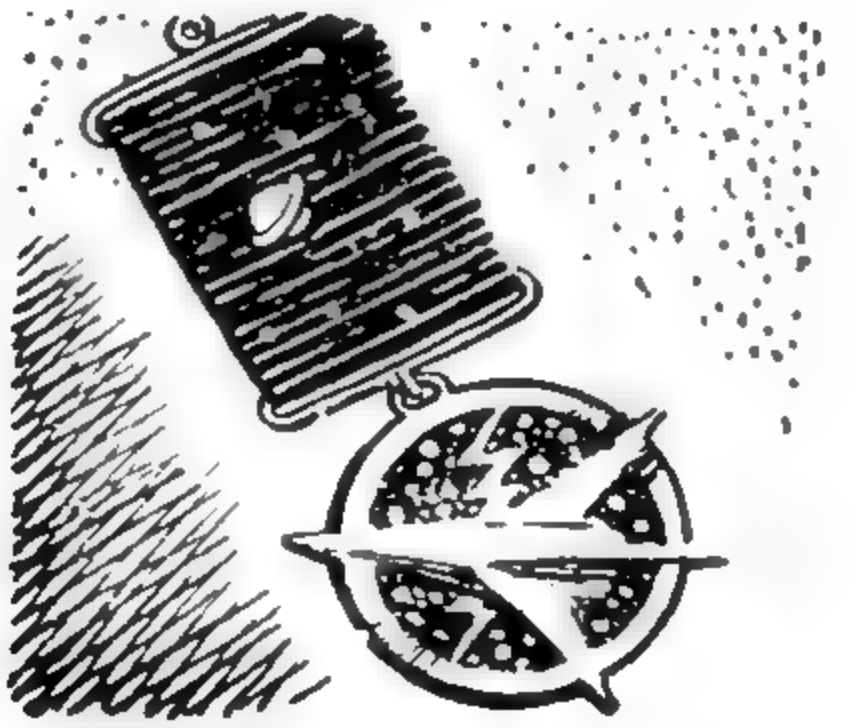
As the life-boat leaped towards him, he feared first that she was going to ram *Thunderbird* and then that she had overshot the mark and was sweeping past. But, superbly handled, she changed course with a great flare of her rocket

tubes and sped on side by side with *Thunderbird* a few hundred yards away. A figure clad in a space-suit emerged through her hull, gave a tremendous leap, and came hurtling through space, a cable trailing behind him as he came.

As the newcomer soared by, Dick, while holding on to *Thunderbird* with one hand, was able to grasp his ankle with the other. The cable secured, the wrecked ship, bearing its load of three frozen bodies, was towed to the space-docks and the Space Hospital of the Power Planet.

Hospital treatment revived and healed the three casualties, and the technicians of the space-docks were able to repair *Thunderbird* and refit her for service. On her next tour on the Meteor Patrol her commander was Acting Space Sub-Lieutenant Hardy.

The traditions of the Spaceways are many and varied. Among them is the record of the discovery of these unsuspected menaces to astrogation, the ice meteors. And with this goes the story of how that veteran of the Service, Space Marshal Sir Richard Hardy, earned its supreme honour, awarded only for devotion to duty in the face of the utmost peril—the Space Cross.



ERIC WILLIAMS

★

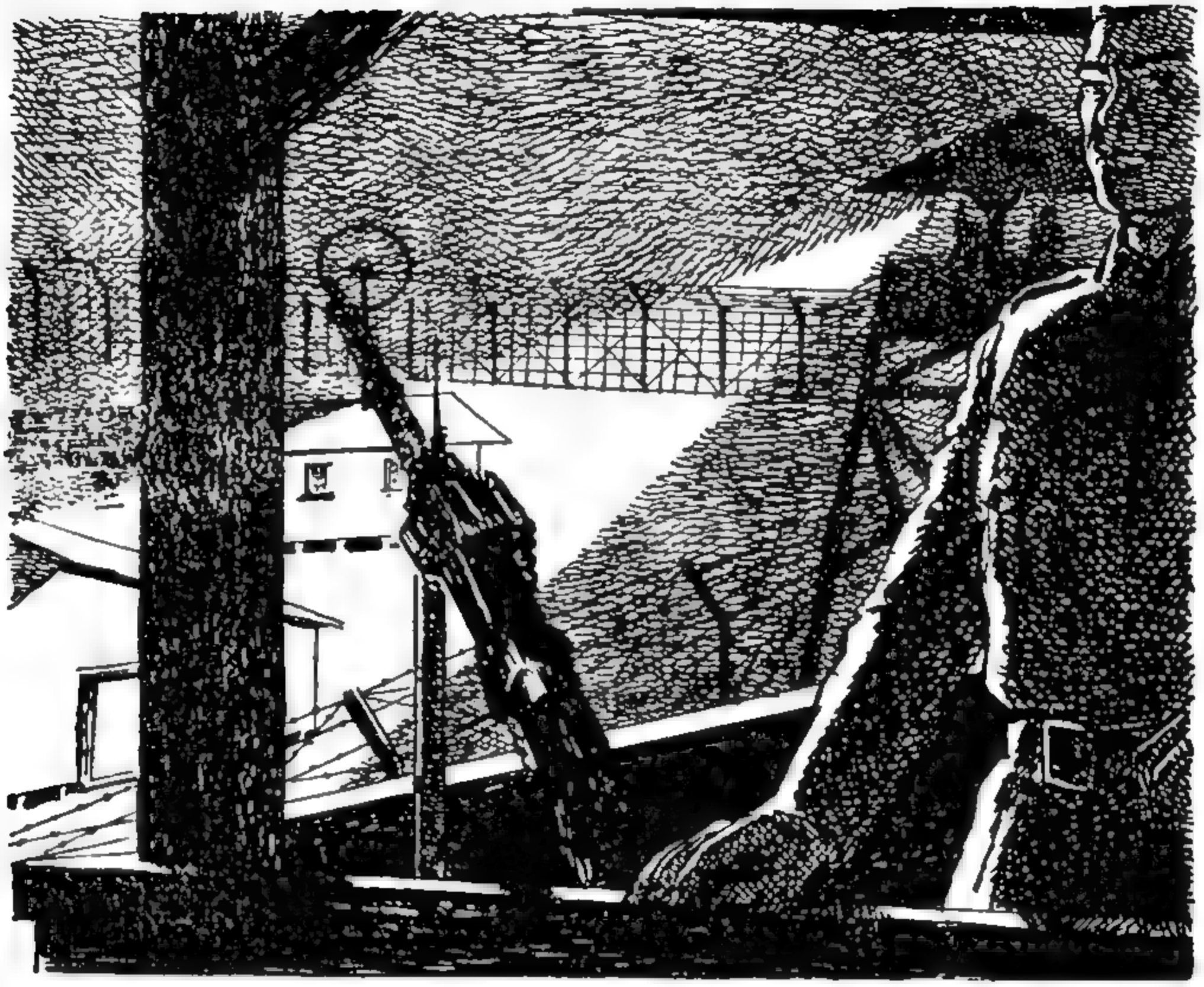
The tunnellers

IN the winter the camp was always wet, the prisoners splashing in their wooden clogs from hut to hut through a sea of mud. Inside the huts water dripped from the roof and gathered in pools on the concrete floor; it was impossible ever to be entirely dry. When you woke in the morning the woodwork of the bunk was damp from the breath of a hundred prisoners, and green mould grew on shoes that were left for more than a couple of days on the floor below the bunks.

Built on a sloping site and surrounded by flat Polish marshland, Oflag XXIB was at once desolate and secure. At night, swept by searchlights and encircled by arc-lamps, it looked like the ring of a giant circus—brilliant and gay from a distance, but from the inside dirty, cold and cheerless.

It was night now. The prisoners had been locked in their huts and in Block 64 the tunnellers were preparing to start work. Tim Bailey, a bomber-pilot, stood by the open trap, pulling an old undervest and pants over his clothes. On his head he wore a woollen skull-cap—this and the working clothes were stained yellow with clay from the walls of the tunnel.

Mark Reader, second man for tonight's digging and Tim's erstwhile navigator, was already dressed in tunnelling clothes. His consisted of pyjama trousers and a handkerchief, knotted



At night the camp was swept by searchlights.

at the corners, on his head. Always imperturbable, Mark was absorbed in trimming a simple lamp made from an old tobacco-tin in which a wick of pyjama cord floated in a mixture of dubbin and margarine.

Tim finished pulling on his clothes. "O.K., Mark?"

"Right." Mark tied the end of a rope plaited from a piece of string round Tim's waist and held the lamp for him as he squeezed through the narrow trap.

Taking the lamp, Tim disappeared from view. Mark followed a short distance after him, while Otto, a fighter-pilot from a Czech squadron, lowered himself into the shaft to operate the crude pump that would keep them supplied with air.

As Tim worked his way along the tunnel that had taken them so long to dig, the lamp began to gutter and fade in the damp stale air. Shielding the flame with his hand, he lay for a while in the cold slime of the tunnel bottom, listening to Mark's grunts as he forced his way along. The tunnel was quite small, barely large enough to take a man in a crouching position, and as he lay there Tim tried not to think of the fifteen feet of clay that separated them from the cold night air above.

Starting again his steady crawl, he reached a small chamber halfway down the tunnel. There Mark had stopped; it was his task for that night to send the toboggan with its loads of excavated clay back to the vertical shaft.

Tim pushed on and was soon busy at the tunnel face. There he lay, picking away at the clay in front of him with a broken table-knife while the lamp sputtered by his head. Above him he could hear the hissing of the fresh air as it came from the jam-tin pipe, and sometimes if the man at the pump was more energetic than usual he could feel its sweet freshness on his face. He enjoyed the job, for all the time he felt that he was getting somewhere. Each lump of clay torn from the ground in front of him was one step nearer home.

There he lay, picking away at the clay in front of him.

Suddenly he felt three sharp tugs on the rope—the alarm signal. He stopped digging and listened. From the vertical shaft came the thud of the trap being replaced. He knew what this meant. The alarm had been given by one of the 'stooges' watching at the windows. Probably one of the guards had paid a surprise visit to the hut, and the tunnellers would have to wait, perhaps for hours, until the unwelcome visitor had gone. The man at the pump could not work because of the noise, and as time passed the air in the tunnel grew more and more stale until it became almost impossible to breathe.

At first he had been warm from the digging, but now the cold from the damp sludge in which he lay began to eat into his bones. He wriggled himself around inside his clothes, trying to get some warmth from the friction. His limbs became numb, and a violent cramp seized the lower part of his body. He had extinguished the 'goon' lamp to conserve the air, and the darkness of the tunnel pressed on him with its icy fingers.

After what seemed hours he heard the trap being raised and a cheerful voice: "O.K., chaps, you can come out now." With difficulty he followed Mark back along the tunnel to the comparative warmth of the barrack block.

When they had rested and got some warmth into their chilled bodies Mark crawled up to the face, Otto to the chamber, while Tim sat on the floor at the bottom of the shaft and slowly worked the bellows of an 'accordion' made from two wooden disks and a canvas kitbag. This, for him, was the worst job of the lot; the steady mechanical swing of the bellows, sitting crouched uncomfortably at the bottom of the shaft, with occasional pauses to pass a load of clay up to the men who waited in the room above to disperse it under the beds. Tomorrow it would be taken out piecemeal and hidden in various places round the camp.

Three weeks later the party was ready to go. Every man had his own plan. The fluent French-speakers were making

for France and the Spanish border; a few intended to head for Warsaw and try to get help from the Underground movement there; but most of them would try to reach the Baltic, where they would have a chance of stowing away on a Swedish ship.

This last was the hope of Tim and Mark. They would make for the main railway line some forty miles from the camp and jump a goods train to Danzig. Tim spoke some German, but Mark had none, and they knew that they had little hope of travelling successfully on a passenger train. One of the Polish airmen in the camp had written in Polish on a piece of paper:

> WE ARE ESCAPED PRISONERS OF WAR. WE WISH TO RETURN TO ENGLAND TO FIGHT AGAIN. WE ASK YOU FOR YOUR HELP. WE REQUIRE:

and then followed a list of words with the English written beside them: SHELTER, FOOD, DRINK, MONEY. A copy of this would be useful to show to a friendly Pole.

The tunnel had now reached a point well outside the prison wire. The tunnellers had bored upwards to within a foot or so of the surface and knew by careful calculation that they would emerge in the potato patch near the earth road. The road was familiar as far as the bend—they had often watched it from the camp and speculated on where it went and what it was like beyond the hill.

They chose a dark moonless night for their dash to freedom. An icy wind blew inwards from the direction of the tunnel exit and the guards were no doubt standing muffled in their greatcoats with their backs to the wind and their faces to the camp; little they imagined that in the dark earth beneath them a dozen men were crawling along like worms!

Tim and Mark were Numbers One and Two in the tunnel, followed by Otto and the others who had earned by their help the right to participate in the escape. Through the hard weeks of preparation they had toiled half-naked, but now they were sweating along in their clothes and greatcoats and

dragging behind them haversacks of food hard-gleaned from their scanty prison rations. It was a great moment—the culmination of months of secret labour under the eye of the enemy. But they had no mind to savour it.

A few minutes' work with the old knife, and Tim brought down the last foot of soil and stones around him. He burst forth into the potato patch like a monster emerging from a gigantic rabbit-hole, and with a quick hand-grasp lugged his companion after him. They were off like shadows, for all goodbyes had been said. Behind them the electric arc-lamps beat starkly on the camp compound; around them the country lay in darkness, with the road a pale blur under their feet.

To make good time the first night was the essential thing—to get beyond the range of the bloodhounds from the local Gestapo barracks. So they kept to the road, now running, now walking, until they had put more than a dozen miles between themselves and their prison. There was a curfew for the Poles, and the road was completely deserted. German patrols were the main risk, but they encountered none. Only twice did they leave the road to skirt a village, taking careful bearings with their 'home-made' compass as they did so.

"It'll be light in an hour," said Mark. "We must find a place to lie up in."

Tim spotted a side road. "This may lead to a farm. Let's try it."

Five minutes later they were at the door of a tiny isolated farm. A dog within was barking loudly and they were glad when the door was opened by a farmer in his nightshirt, a lantern in his hand.

Tim produced the piece of paper and pointed to the words WE REQUIRE HELP, then to the word SHELTER, but the man merely shook his head and muttered something in Polish.

"It looks like 'no go'," Tim said.

"I don't think he can read," Mark told him. "A lot of these peasants can't."

Tim pointed to the Polish words and tried to pronounce

They were glad when the door was opened.

them, but the man only muttered again and tried to shut the door in their faces. Mark put his foot in the door. It was nearly daylight now and it would be dangerous to go out on to the road again.

Tim tried his scanty German. "We are prisoners-of-war. *Kriegsgefengenen*—English—*Englander*. We escape. You hide us? Yes?" He pointed to himself and to Mark and then towards the barn at the back of the house.

A gleam of understanding came into the man's eyes. He beckoned them into the house, shutting and barring the door behind him. "Julka!" he shouted. "Julka!"

From the room at the back of the house they could hear a woman's voice. She sounded sleepy and reluctant to be wakened. The man went to the door on the far side of the room. "Julka!" he called, and then a stream of incomprehensible Polish.

Tim and Mark stood waiting in the small room with the

beaten-earth floor. It was dimly illuminated by the lantern which the man had placed on the table. He was taking a loaf of bread and some cold potatoes from a cupboard in the corner of the room.

The woman came out through the door at the back. She was an enormous woman in a black skirt, a shawl thrown over her head. She was wearing wooden clogs. "What do you want?" she asked in German.

"We are Englishmen who have escaped from the prison camp," Tim told her. "We wish to hide until the evening."

She clutched the shawl to her throat and closed her eyes. She crossed to the window and, pulling the rough curtains to one side, looked out.

"We are not followed," Tim said.

"They will shoot us," the woman said. She stated it simply, without emphasis.

"They do not know that we are here," Tim told her. "Hide us until the evening. We will leave as soon as it is dark."

"They will shoot us," the woman repeated. She crossed herself. "Why did you come here?"

"We have nowhere to go."

The woman looked at the man. He returned her glance without speaking. She said something in Polish, but still he did not reply. She turned to Tim. "We will hide you in the barn," she said. "If the Germans come, we do not know that you are there."

"Thank you."

"It is against them," the woman said. "They shot my son."

She cut two thick slices from the loaf of bread and handed one to each of them, adding for each two of the potatoes from the bowl. Then she took them out through the back door across a muddy yard to a wooden barn which stood behind the house. There was a horse in the barn and a rough farm-cart. Above the stable was a loft half full of hay. The woman motioned them to go up.

"If the Germans come, hide under the hay," she said. "If

they find you they will shoot us both. You must leave as soon as it is dark."

It was warm and comfortable in the hay and they sat there eating the coarse black bread and the potatoes. Tim told Mark what the woman had said. "I didn't like forcing ourselves on them," he said, "but we had to do it. They'll both be shot if we're caught."

"I don't like it either," Mark told him. "Suppose they give us away to the Germans?"

"We can't win out unless we take a few risks. If you didn't feel like chancing it, why didn't you say so before we spoke to them?"

"You're right," said Mark. "But I must say I wish we hadn't tackled them. I wish we'd hidden somewhere else!"

Tim smothered his rising irritation. "We'll just have to trust them now, old chap," he said gently. "It's time we got some sleep." With so much at stake, it was only too easy for one or other to get edgy and quarrelsome, but fortunately both had the good sense to realize the risk.

But Tim could not sleep. He lay curled in the hay, listening to Mark's steady breathing and watching the roof of the barn take shape in the light of the morning. He felt that Mark was right. They should have seen this thing through alone. He considered leaving and hiding up in the open country, but decided that to move abroad in daylight would be more unsafe than staying where they were. He lay there listening to every sound while Mark slept peacefully by his side.

Slowly the long day dragged by. At midday the woman brought them a large bowl of potato soup. She told them that several German patrols had been seen on the road, but none, as yet, had come to the house.

When they had eaten the soup they buried themselves under the hay and tried to sleep again. They would have to travel far that night and they wished to save their strength.

Later in the afternoon they heard someone in the yard. Then the sound of footsteps climbing the ladder into the loft.

They lay still under the hay. Below in the stable they could hear a man's voice talking to the horse in Polish.

"You there . . . you *Englander!*" It was the woman.

Cautiously Tim peered out from under the hay.

"The Germans come. They search every house. You will be found. We shall be shot."

"We'll go," Tim said.

"No. It is too late. They are in the fields. They are all

Tim and Mark lay scarcely able to breathe while the farmer piled the potatoes high on top of them.

round the farm. My husband will take you. We will hide you under the potatoes. You must hurry."

They climbed down the ladder, Mark following Tim in ignorance, not understanding what was being said, but knowing by the terror in the woman's voice and by Tim's urgent movements that a crisis had arisen.

In the barn they found the old horse already harnessed to the cart. It was a wooden cart with solid sides, shaped like a coffin. They climbed in and lay side by side along the bottom.

"My husband will leave you by the railway line," the

woman said. "It will be dark in a few hours. Beware of soldiers on the line. May the good God protect you!"

"Thank you," Tim said. "We shall remember you!"

"It is against them," the woman said.

The farmer came staggering across the barn with the first sack of potatoes. He poured them over the two prisoners. They smelled earthy and slightly mouldy. He brought another sack and then another. Tim and Mark lay scarcely able to breathe while he piled the potatoes high on top of them.

Then the cart began to move. With the jolting of the cart the potatoes settled until the two were almost suffocated. They could feel the cart lurch as it crossed the yard and then they heard the horse's hooves ring on the metal of the road and the movement of the cart became more smooth. They went on like this for some time. Finally, when the weight of the potatoes had become almost more than they could bear, the cart stopped and they heard the peasant get down and walk round to the tailboard.

"It is safe," he said in German.

Tim and Mark slowly dug themselves out from under the potatoes. They were stiff, and at first they could not stand. When they had got the blood circulating again they stood up and looked about them. There was no cover, nothing but the wide expanse of low marshy land so common in that part of Poland. Narrow dikes seemed to run for miles in straight lines across the countryside. It was early evening, and a chill wind was sweeping across the flat ground. In the west the sun was red below straight lines of grey cloud.

Tim turned to the Pole. "Where is the railway—*Eisenbahn —Zug?*"

The man pointed towards the setting sun.

"We'll hide here until it gets dark," Mark said. "It won't be long now. No point in walking across the open country while it's still light." He turned to the Pole: "*Aufwiedersehen.*"

The Pole said something which they could not understand. Mark held out his hand, which the man took after wiping his own on the leg of his trousers. Tim shook his hand, and

he climbed back on to the cart. The two prisoners stood watching as the cart lurched slowly down the road.

They crossed the field and lay down by one of the dikes.

"If we see any Huns we'll roll down into the ditch," Mark said.

"O.K." Tim looked down at the earth-stained water which lay darkly in the bottom of the dike. "Wonder if it's fit to drink?"

"Shouldn't chance it," Mark said.

As soon as it grew dark they walked in the direction indicated by the peasant. It was heavy going and they made slow progress, sometimes doubling back to avoid the larger dikes. The smaller ones they jumped, often slipping into the slimy water.

After walking for some time they came to the railway. It ran straight as a ruled line as far as the eye could see.

"Not much chance of jumping a train here," Mark said, looking up and down the line. "They'd be travelling at about sixty along this stretch. It's too open."

"We'll have to follow it up until we come to a slope or a sharp bend. We'll walk with an interval between us and take it in turns to walk in front. If the man in front runs into trouble the one behind must stay where he is. No point in both getting caught if we can avoid it."

It was easier walking on the railway track and Tim pushed on at a good speed, stopping occasionally to listen. Some miles farther on he came to a slight incline. Ahead of him he could see the dark outline of the entrance to a tunnel. He waited for Mark to come up to him.

"This seems a good place—they'll slow up on the incline and we can jump for it. I don't fancy walking through the tunnel, do you?"

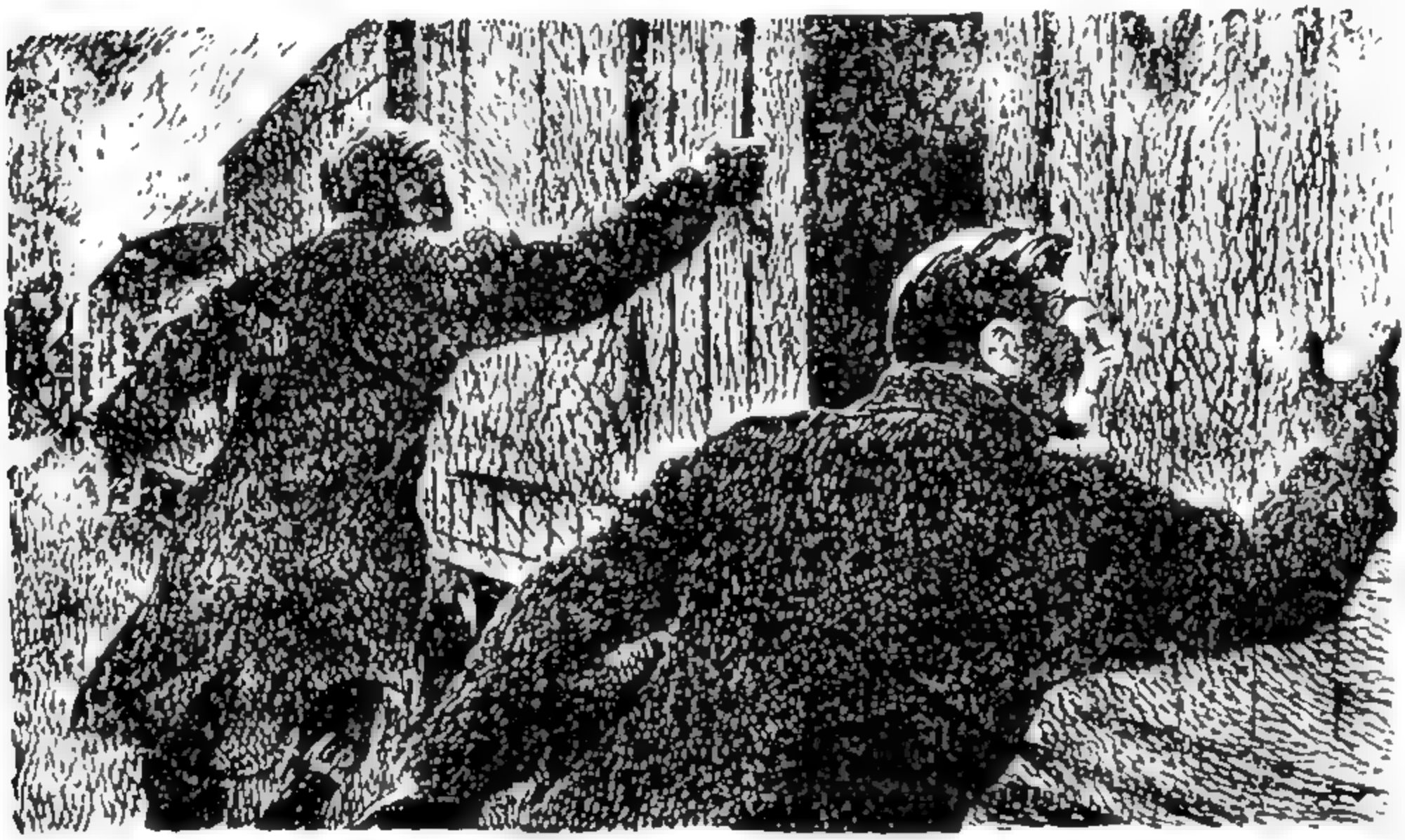
"No thanks," Mark said. "We'll wait here and see how fast they come."

"Better move down the track a bit," Tim suggested. "It'll be dangerous to jump on too near the tunnel."

They walked back down the track. Dimly in the distance

they could hear the sound of a train whistle, blown by the wind. They separated and stood waiting for the train. Then they saw it, the red glow from the fire reflecting downwards from the plume of smoke. The permanent way trembled as she came steaming up, puffing in protest as she came to the slope. She seemed to be travelling fast.

'We'll never do it,' Tim thought. And then the train was



He seized a rail that ran down the side of one of the trucks and jumped for his life.

on him and he found himself running with it, running as he had never run before. He seized a rail that ran down the side of one of the trucks and jumped for his life. He found a foothold on one of the brake-rods, and turned in time to see Mark clinging to one of the trucks as the train hurtled into the tunnel.

It was the afternoon of the following day before the train finally came to rest in a railway siding. It had been an uncomfortable night and day of shunting, stopping, starting and stopping again. Several times they had slipped some

trucks and taken on others, but now it seemed as though they had reached their destination. The engine had gone, leaving the train in a goods-yard with sidings and trucks as far as the eye could see. Not far to the north they could see the masts and funnels of some shipping, and they guessed that they were in one of the Baltic ports.

"We'll wait until it's dark and then go and have a look at the ships," Tim said.

The hours until darkness fell seemed interminable. It was cold in the open truck and they dared not stand for fear of being seen. Several times during the afternoon they heard footsteps and voices, but no one came to the truck where they were hidden. As soon as it was dark they slipped out of their hiding-place and walked quietly in the direction of the shipping. Once they had to make a quick dive under one of the trucks to avoid a watchman with a torch, but at last they found themselves by a tall wooden fence, which they thought must be the boundary of the goods-yard. Fortunately the fence had been built to keep people out, not in, and they were able to climb it easily. On the other side of the fence was a road, which was deserted. They dropped quickly down and walked in the direction of the docks.

As they came round a bend in the narrow road they saw the entrance to the dock. It was a high gate with a sentry-box, and by the light of the single arc-lamp they could see the sentry, wearing a long greatcoat and a steel helmet that came down low over his face.

"Walk on," Tim whispered.

They walked on past the sentry, trying to appear unconcerned, and turned another bend in the road. The dock here was guarded by an open barbed-wire fence, through which they could see the shipping, vague and unrecognizable in the darkness.

"We'll have to climb the fence," Mark said.

Once inside the dock they crept silently down to the quays. They knew that if they were caught here explanation would avail them nothing. Outside the wire they might have bluffed

and got away with it, but here they must do everything by stealth.

At first the long concrete quays proved disappointing. There was very little shipping, mostly coal-barges, and none of it looked as though it had moved for some time.

"These can't be the main docks," Tim whispered.

"We'll try farther down," Mark suggested. "This looks like a coaling station."

As they worked their way round the quays they came to an area of large warehouses and derricks. Here there was an occasional arc-lamp and men were loading ships.

Mark suddenly caught Tim by the arm. "Look!"

Almost opposite them was a black cargo-steamer with a red funnel. On her side in letters six feet high was the word 'SVERIGE.'

"Swedish!"

"Let's see if we can get aboard," Tim said.

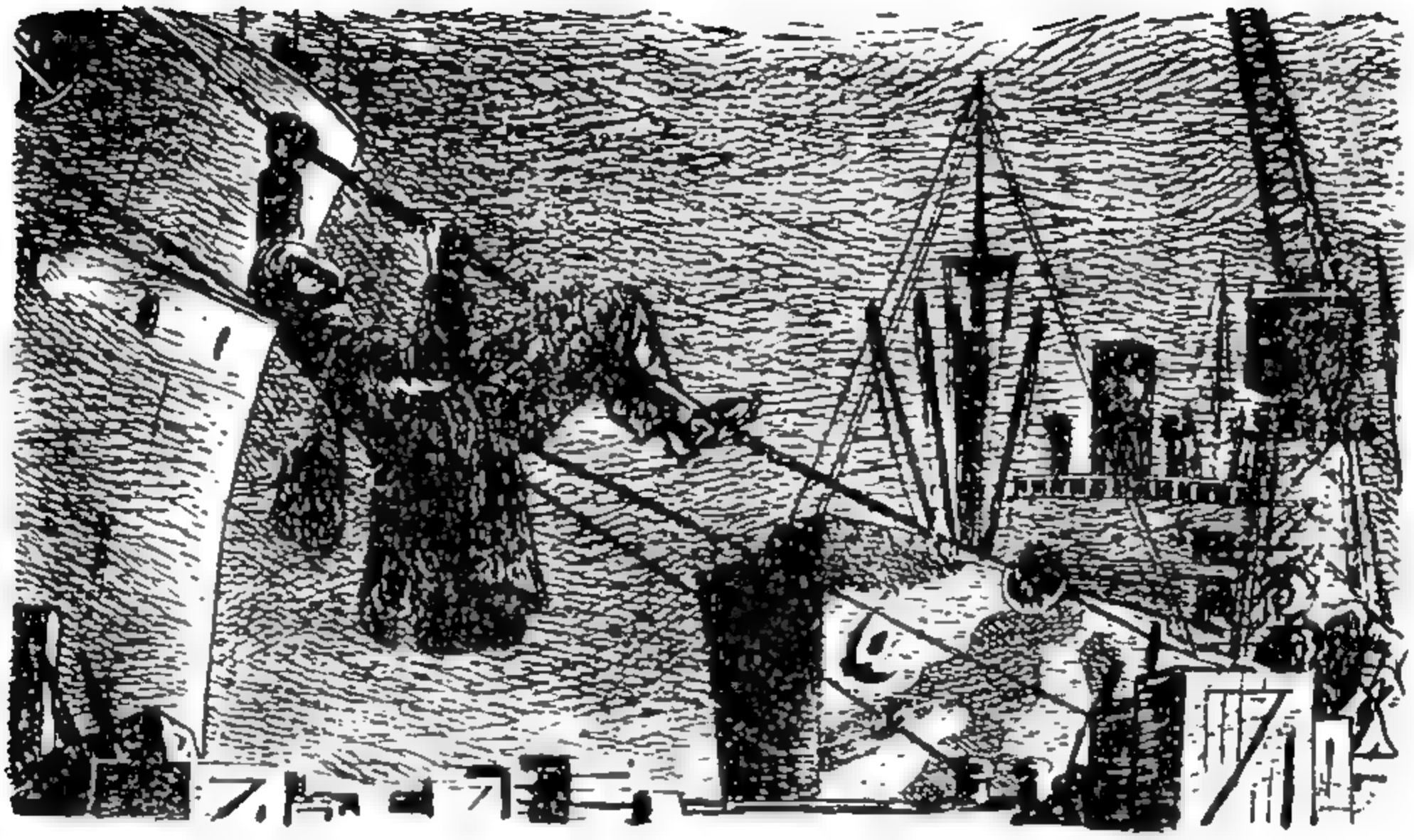
They used the shelter of some stacked bales to approach the ship, which was being loaded by the fore-hatches. She was moored fore and aft to bollards on the quayside, and a thin plume of smoke rose from her single stack.

"She'll be sailing soon," Mark whispered.

Tim examined the ship, looking for the best place to climb aboard. By the light from the arc-lamps he could see several men moving on the quay, and as they watched a German sentry walked slowly toward them through the patch of light.

"We'll have to get aboard from the stern," he whispered. "Work round behind these bales."

The stern hawser was stretched tight between the ship and the bollard. It sloped up slightly towards the ship, but it was in darkness and it seemed the safest way to get aboard. Gripping the hawser with his hands, Tim swung out across the sea and, hanging by his hands and legs, inched his way across, slowly and painfully, hanging like a bat from a tree, the hawser cutting into his hands. The last few feet were the most difficult, but he managed to reach the rail and to



Hanging by his legs and arms, he inched his way across.

haul himself aboard, where he waited for Mark to join him.

On the deck they waited for their panting to subside before they crept forward to a companion way where a light was showing and the sound of voices mixed with the scraping of knives and forks on plates.

"Shall we risk it?" Mark asked.

"No." Tim was suddenly frightened of speaking to the crew—to be given away to the Germans at this stage would be heartbreaking. "Let's hide in one of the lifeboats."

They untied the canvas cover of one of the boats and climbed in. It was warm here out of the wind and presently they fell asleep.

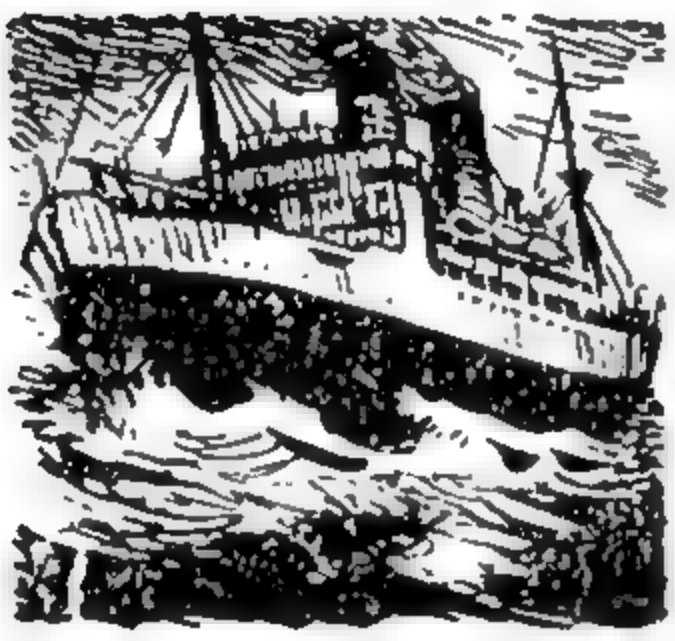
They were wakened by the noise of the ship casting off, but they stayed in the boat until they were well clear of the land before they declared themselves to the captain. At first he seemed frightened and threatened to put back and hand them over to the Germans, but at length they persuaded him to take them with him to Sweden.

A few months later they flew the leading aircraft in a mass raid on the docks from which they had escaped.

N. G. STRONG

★

In the face of considerable hazards



21.10 Slow Ahead Toby wrote down in both columns in the engine-room log. He saw the second and third engineers move the valve-gear levers forward and spin the hand-wheels of the steam throttles. Clang! Clang! *Half Ahead both.* He scribbled it down, and noted that it was carried out. That was his duty on engine-room stand-by.

It was by no means difficult for the men on the controls to make a mistake. Down there, standing between the two great engines, with your hands on the controls, your eyes on the telegraph pointer, and the lights gleaming brightly on the polished machinery, it was like a world on its own. No telling if the ship was moving ahead or astern, or even moving at all, sometimes. So it was his duty, as junior engineer, to check that they did what the engine-room telegraph said. Some day, perhaps, he'd be standing there at the controls. . . .

Full Ahead both. All clear. Good. That meant they'd left Plymouth, homeward bound. In a few minutes the Second and Third went up the steel ladder, their stand-by duty done. Only the Fourth and himself in charge tonight. Normally there would be one less, himself. But in the confined waters of the busy English Channel you might have to stop

A sound made him look up and he saw the Fourth make a sign towards the propeller-shaft tunnels.

the ship hurriedly to avoid a collision, so an extra engineer was on duty.

Tomorrow morning, if they caught the tide, he would be back at home. Back from his first trip! Up topsides it was now dark, with a thickening mist, but down here the picture was the same as ever; the same as it had been in the Great Australian Bight, the palm-fringed harbour of Colombo, the awful heat of the Red Sea, the tedious crawl through the Suez Canal. Glistening lights, thundering noise, the air warm and oily as you breathed it down your throat.

A slight sensation rather than a sound made him look up, and he saw the Fourth make a sign towards the propeller-shaft tunnels. He knew what it meant without thinking. Time for him to inspect the bearings on the propeller shafts. No chance of ordinary conversation against that steady background of noise.

He moved aft and passed through the watertight door in

the bulkhead. The bulkhead was a sheer steel wall across the ship right up to the main deck. There was another one between the engine- and boiler-rooms, and between all the holds, so that if the ship got holed below the water-line only one compartment would flood, and she wouldn't sink. Heavy sliding doors in them were raised or lowered by electric motors. Those in the engine-room were normally kept raised, so that the engineers could move freely from one part to another.

Toby now stepped through into the tunnel, which ran along the bottom of the ship from the engine-room to the stern. There was just room to stand upright, and on either side of him revolved the two long shafts, about as thick as his body, which ran nearly half the length of the ship, and passed out through the stern to turn the two giant propellers.

Every few yards they were supported by bearings which had to be inspected regularly in case they were getting hot. In the top of each bearing was clamped a thermometer, but Toby had no need to look at it, merely placing his hand on each bearing as he passed. In any case he would have known of a hot bearing before he even reached it by the slight smell of the hot metal, a difference in the oily smell of the tunnel, the merest change in the rumbling thunderous noise which filled the tunnel, or a hundred and one other little sensations to which a layman would have been oblivious. He walked the length of the tunnel and passed into the stern compartment, shut off by another bulkhead, with its watertight door. He paused for a minute to inspect the stern glands through which the shafts passed out into the water. Above his head was a steel ladder which ran straight up through a vertical shaft to the main deck, and gave access to the stern compartment from above, in case for any reason the tunnel became impassable.

He turned back through the watertight door into the tunnel and was halfway to the engine-room when, through all the steady echoing rumble, his brain discerned another noise. The engine-room telegraph. Twice! That could only mean

He started to run towards the engine-room.

an emergency stop. He suddenly recalled the black, misty night outside, and started to run towards the engine-room. The engines were already slowing down. Then more sounds registered in his brain. Another bell. Not the telegraph. And a different rumbling. Good lord! They were closing the watertight doors from the bridge. That was the warning bell. At each end of the tunnel the doors dropped swiftly down, and at the same time he heard, close to the steel plates of the ship's side, the thump, thump, *thump* of another vessel's propellers. Suddenly the whole ship shook and rocked, and there was a roaring, shrieking, grinding crash of metal, more gigantic than anything he had ever heard. He saw that the propeller-shafts were now hardly turning. The grinding, rending noise continued for what seemed an age, then he heard the rush of water.

With the thunder of the engines stilled it seemed almost quiet, and he stood there for a moment, wondering what he

should do. It sounded as if the ship had been holed in the engine-room. No explosion though, so the boiler-room was all right. The lights were still on, and he could hear the distant drone of the generators. But the generator-room was right up near the main deck, far above the water-line, in case of just such a disaster as this.

He walked forward and stood looking uncertainly at the bulkhead which separated him from the engine-room. As he did so a limp jet of water came gushing out of the speaking tube which passed through the bulkhead. He had his jack-knife out in an instant, and cut the tube off close to the bulkhead. Close by it, in a clip, was a wooden plug made to fit the tube, and he rammed it home in the hole, the water spraying all over him as he did so.

Now what? The water in the engine-room must be up to the height of the tube, level with his head, and presumably still rising just as quickly as the sea could rush in through the ship's torn side. The pressure on the bulkhead must be terrific. He noticed now that the bulkhead itself had been strained by the collision, and was bulging out slightly towards him. There were queer little metallic groans from it as the ship rolled to the swell.

Toby was just wondering whether the Fourth had managed to escape up the ladder after the shutting down, when the lights quietly went out. The horrible blackness seemed intense in the few seconds it took him to pull his torch out, and he flashed it round him reassuringly. That meant that the water had reached the fuse board for the tunnel lights, another six foot up. H'm, all that weight of water in the engine-room would make her pretty low in the water, but she would still float happily enough.

He took stock of his position. The propeller-shaft tunnel was right at the bottom of the ship, well below the normal water-line, and he was completely shut off by the watertight doors at each end.

Of course, he could always escape, he knew that. The watertight doors were operated from the bridge, but they

had individual local-control buttons. All he had to do was to walk down to the after end of the tunnel, operate the door, pass through into the stern compartment, close the door, and climb up the escape shaft to safety. But it was unpardonable to open a watertight door and endanger the ship in an emergency of this sort. Supposing the engine-room bulkhead gave way whilst he was raising the door? The water would sweep down the tunnel like a tidal wave—sweep him away and pour on through the door. Raising and lowering the door by the local control was quite a slow business, and he wouldn't have a chance.

Besides, he was one of the ship's engineers; he had a duty. He knew that all the other engineers would be busy, making what repairs they could, getting the emergency dynamo started—they all had emergency duties to carry out. But what was *his* duty? What was expected of him? Well, to stick to his post, at least. And his post was clearly that straining bulkhead. Not running away opening watertight doors, and endangering other people's lives. He was the man on the spot, they would rely on him to do whatever he could for the safety of the ship. That's what was expected of him.

He shone his torch all round. Let's see, there ought to be . . . Good. Some heavy planks and lumps of wood, and spare lengths of stout steel steam-pipe. The tunnel was used for storing things of that sort. He set to work dragging them out. By using a length of piping as a lever he slowly moved some heavy planks into position across the weakest part of the bulkhead. He braced them with more planks, and with lengths of steam-piping. It took all his strength, and he was soon gasping and sweating, and his hands were grazed and sore. As he looked at his crude shoring he knew that it would not take much strain. But it might stave off the collapse of the bulkhead for a little time. And if they were trying to get a collision mat over the hole every minute helped. With the tunnel full of water the ship would still float, but she would be even lower in the water. Perhaps he could strengthen his work up a bit. He found some heavier baulks of timber and

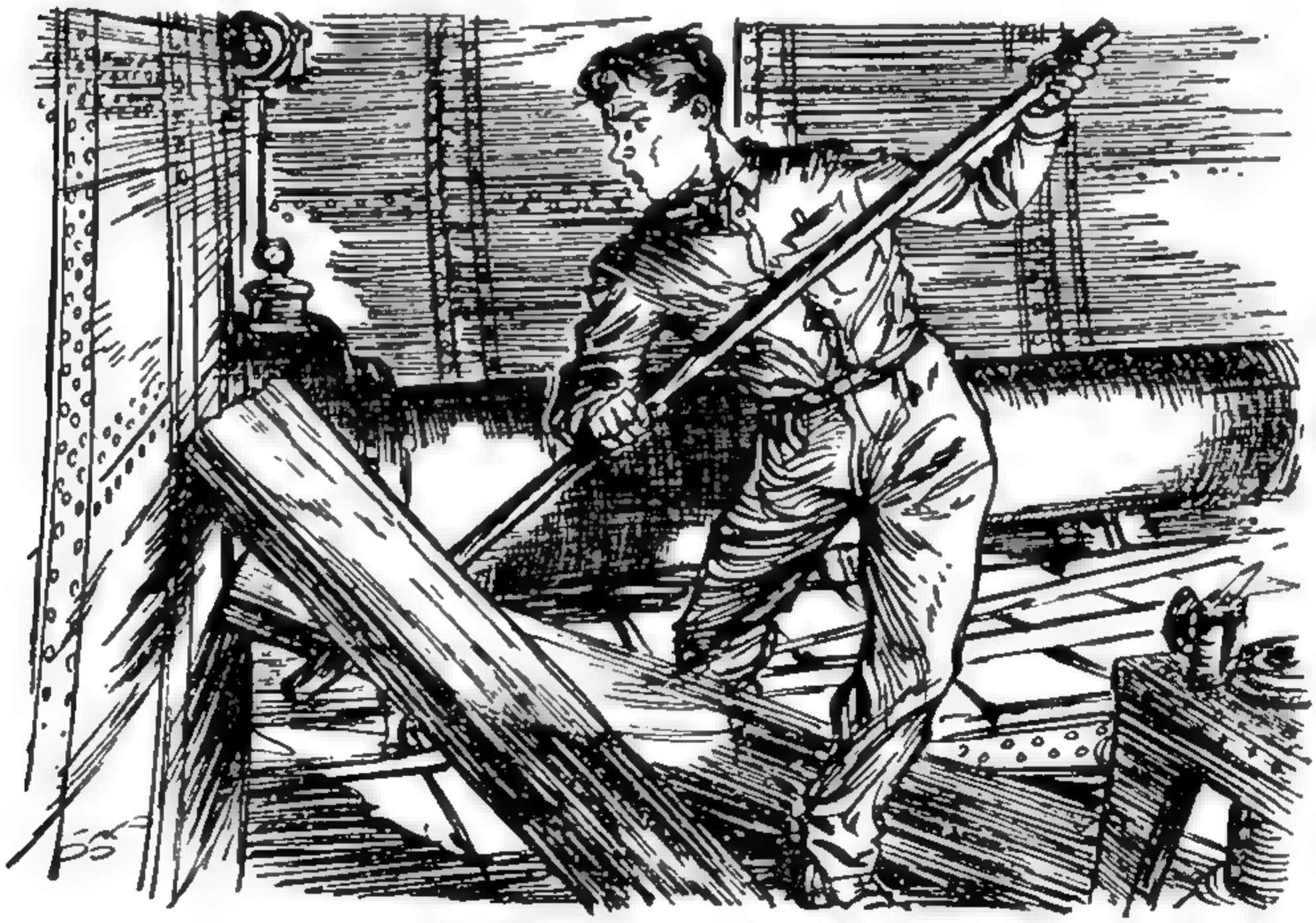
started trying to drag one towards the bulkhead. He tugged and heaved with all his might, but he could only move it a few inches at a time. He groaned aloud at his impotence.

Suddenly, in the quiet of the tunnel, a bell started ringing. Startled, he turned round and saw a crack of light appearing at the after end. Someone was raising the watertight door! A torch flashed through the lengthening gap, and he heard the Third's voice calling: "You all right, Toby?"

"Yes, yes." He tried to stop his voice going squeaky with relief and excitement. "This bulkhead's a bit groggy, though. Would you have a look at it?" he asked, as the Third emerged from the tunnel.

"Oh, you've been doing a bit of overtime, have you, youngster? Good work. Single-handed, too. Very good work. We've been rammed by another ship. It's foggy up topsides. They're getting a collision mat over the hole. Engine-room's flooded. Boiler-room's all right."

"Er—what about the Fourth?" asked Toby anxiously.



He moved some heavy planks into position . . .

"Oh, he's all right. Shut down the engines pretty smartly and nipped up the ladder just ahead of the water. We guessed you were shut in the tunnel. Thought you might come up the escape shaft, though."

"Well, it meant opening the watertight door. I didn't quite like to——"

"Quite right, youngster." The Third gave him an approving glance; then he moved his torch slowly over the bulkhead. "All the same, I don't quite like the look of this. I'd better get the Chief. You stand by."

He clumped off down the tunnel again, and had just got through the door when there was a sudden sharp noise from the straining bulkhead, and a rivet flew out, followed by a spurt of water.

"Here, Third," shouted Toby, down the length of the tunnel. "There's a rivet gone."

"That means it's going. Run, Toby! Run for your life! I'll have to start the door closing."

Exhausted and sweating as he was, Toby ran, his heavy engine-room boots slipping and sliding on the floorboards. The noises behind him increased and he was only halfway to the already closing door when he heard the bulkhead go. Heard the rending of steel, the rush of cascading water; and through it all he heard the imperious warning bell of the closing door. He ran wildly on, and with five yards to go felt an avalanche of water strike his legs and push them from under him. He fell backwards, the torrent swept over him, and he was carried along like a leaf in a millrace.

Bumped and battered, he was just aware of being shot through the narrowing gap at the bottom of the watertight door, the bell sounding loudly in his ears. As he struggled to get up the ringing ceased, the rush of water fell away, and he felt the Third's strong arm about him.

"You cut it fine, youngster. Didn't think you were going to make it. Sorry about the door. Had to do it, though. Anyway, it's closed now, we're all right. Better rest for a minute. Here——" he caught Toby as he swayed and fell.

Toby came to consciousness to find himself in bed in the clean white sick-bay. Through the open door he could see the back of the attendant in the dressing-room, busy with a hot-water bottle. From somewhere up near the deckhead he could hear a voice.

"All danger has now been averted." He recognized the

With five yards to go he felt an avalanche of water strike his legs, and sweep them from under him.

Old Man's voice; addressing the passengers over the loud-speaker system, apparently. He sat up listening. "Emergency repairs have been made, pumping is in progress, and tugs are standing by to take us in tow. I must tell you that the crew have acted splendidly throughout. Particularly the members of the engine-room staff on duty at the time, who minimized the danger by prompt and skilful action in the face of considerable hazards. But this, of course, is only what I expected of them——"

Toby lay back on the pillows, and a contented smile played round his mouth.

"Only what I expected," he murmured to himself.

He had thought the window cheerful to begin with, but now he thanked God for it many times a day.

H. G. WELLS

★

Through a window

AFTER his legs were set, they carried Bailey into the study and put him on a couch before the open window. There he lay, a live—even a feverish man down to the loins, and below that a double-barrelled mummy swathed in white wrappings. He tried to read, even tried to write a little, but most of the time he looked out of the window.

He had thought the window cheerful to begin with, but now he thanked God for it many times a day. Within, the room was dim and grey, and in the reflected light the wear of the furniture showed plainly. His medicine and drink stood on the little table, with such litter as the bare branches of a bunch of grapes or the ashes of a cigar upon a green plate, or a day-old evening paper. The view outside was flooded with light, and across the corner of it came the head of the acacia, and at the foot the top of the balcony-railing of hammered iron. In the foreground was the weltering silver of the river, never quiet and yet never tiresome. Beyond was the reedy bank, a broad stretch of meadow land, and then a dark line of trees ending in a group of poplars at the distant bend of the river, and, upstanding behind them, a square church tower.

Up and down the river, all day long, things were passing. Now a string of barges drifting down to London, piled with lime or barrels of beer; then a steam-launch, disengaging

heavy masses of black smoke, and disturbing the whole width of the river with long rolling waves; then an impetuous electric launch, and then a boatload of pleasure-seekers, a solitary sculler, or a four from some rowing club. Perhaps the river was quietest of a morning or late at night. One moonlight night some people drifted down singing, and with a zither playing—it sounded very pleasantly across the water.

In a few days Bailey began to recognize some of the craft; in a week he knew the intimate history of half a dozen. The launch *Luzon*, from Fitzgibbon's, two miles up, would go fretting by, sometimes three or four times a day, conspicuous with its colouring of Indian-red and yellow, and its two Oriental attendants; and one day, to Bailey's vast amusement, the houseboat *Purple Emperor* came to a stop outside, and breakfasted in the most shameless domesticity. Then one afternoon the captain of a slow-moving barge began a quarrel with his wife as they came into sight from the left, and had carried it to personal violence before he vanished behind the window-frame to the right. Bailey regarded all this as an entertainment got up to while away his illness, and applauded all the more moving incidents. Mrs. Green, coming in at rare intervals with his meals, would catch him clapping his hands or softly crying, "Encore!" But the river players had other engagements, and his encore went unheeded.

"I should never have thought I could take such an interest in things that did not concern me," said Bailey to Wilderspin, who used to come in in his nervous friendly way and try to comfort the sufferer by being talked to. "I thought this idle capacity was distinctive of little children and old maids. But it's just circumstances. I simply can't work, and things have to drift; it's no good to fret and struggle. And so I lie here and am as amused as a baby with a rattle, at this river and its affairs.

"Sometimes, of course, it gets a bit dull, but not often.

"I would give anything, Wilderspin, for a swamp—just one swamp—once. Heads swimming and a steam-launch to

the rescue, and a chap or so hauled out with a boathook. . . . There goes Fitzgibbon's launch! They have a new boathook, I see, and the little blackie is still in the dumps. I don't think he's very well, Wilderspin. He's been like that for two or three days, squatting sulky-fashion and meditating over the churning of the water. Unwholesome for him to be always staring at the frothy water running away from the stern."

They watched the little steamer fuss across the patch of sunlit river, suffer momentary occultation from the acacia, and glide out of sight behind the dark window-frame.

"I'm getting a wonderful eye for details," said Bailey: "I spotted that new boathook at once. The other nigger is a funny little chap. He never used to swagger with the old boathook like that."

"Malays, aren't they?" said Wilderspin.

"Don't know," said Bailey. "I thought one called all that sort of mariner Lascar."

Then he began to tell Wilderspin what he knew of the private affairs of the houseboat, *Purple Emperor*. "Funny," he said, "how these people come from all points of the compass—from Oxford and Windsor, from Asia and Africa —and gather and pass opposite the window just to entertain me. One man floated out of the infinite the day before yesterday, caught one perfect crab opposite, lost and recovered a scull, and passed on again. Probably he will never come into my life again. So far as I am concerned, he has lived and had his little troubles, perhaps thirty—perhaps forty—years on the earth, merely to make an ass of himself for three minutes in front of my window. Wonderful thing, Wilderspin, if you come to think of it."

"Yes," said Wilderspin; "*isn't* it?"

A day or two after this Bailey had a brilliant morning. Indeed, towards the end of the affair, it became almost as exciting as any window show very well could be. We will, however, begin at the beginning.

Bailey was all alone in the house, for his housekeeper had gone into the town three miles away to pay bills, and the

servant had her holiday. The morning began dull. A canoe went up about half-past nine, and later a boat-load of camping men came down. But this was mere margin. Things became cheerful about ten o'clock.

It began with something white fluttering in the remote distance where the three poplars marked the river bend. "Pocket-handkerchief," said Bailey, when he saw it. "No. Too big! Flag, perhaps."

However, it was not a flag, for it jumped about. "Man in whites running fast, and this way," said Bailey. "That's luck! But his whites are precious loose!"

Then a singular thing happened. There was a minute pink gleam among the dark trees in the distance, and a little puff of pale grey that began to drift and vanish eastward. The man in white jumped and continued running. Presently the report of the shot arrived.

"What the devil!" said Bailey. "Looks as if someone was shooting at him."

He sat up stiffly and stared hard. The white figure was coming along the pathway through the corn. "It's one of those niggers from the Fitzgibbon's," said Bailey; "or may I be hanged! I wonder why he keeps sawing with his arm."

Then three other figures became indistinctly visible against the dark background of the trees.

Abruptly on the opposite bank a man walked into the picture. He was black-bearded, dressed in flannels, had a red belt, and a vast grey felt hat. He walked, leaning very much forward and with his hands swinging before him. Behind him one could see the grass swept by the towing-rope of the boat he was dragging. He was steadfastly regarding the white figure that was hurrying through the corn. Suddenly he stopped. Then, with a peculiar gesture, Bailey could see that he began pulling in the tow-rope hand over hand. Over the water could be heard the voices of the people in the still invisible boat.

"What are you after, Hagshot?" said someone.

The individual with the red belt shouted something that

"It's a man hunt, by all that's holy!" said Bailey.

was inaudible, and went on lugging in the rope, looking over his shoulder at the advancing white figure as he did so. He came down the bank, and the rope bent a lane among the reeds and lashed the water between his pulls.

Just then the bows of the boat came into view, with the towing-mast and a tall, fair-haired man standing up and trying to see over the bank. The boat bumped unexpectedly among the reeds, and the tall, fair-haired man disappeared suddenly, having apparently fallen back into the invisible part of the boat. There was a curse and some indistinct laughter. Hagshot did not laugh, but hastily clambered into the boat and pushed off. Abruptly the boat passed out of Bailey's sight.

But it was still audible. The medley of voices suggested that its occupants were busy telling each other what to do.

The running figure was drawing near the bank. Bailey could now see clearly that it was one of Fitzgibbon's

Orientals, and began to realize what the sinuous thing the man carried in his hand might be. Three other men followed one another through the corn, and the foremost carried what was probably the gun. They were perhaps two hundred yards or more behind the Malay.

"It's a man hunt, by all that's holy!" said Bailey.

The Malay stopped for a moment and surveyed the bank to the right. Then he left the path, and, breaking through the corn, vanished in that direction. The three pursuers followed suit, and their heads and gesticulating arms above the corn, after a brief interval, also went out of Bailey's field of vision.

Bailey so far forgot himself as to swear. "Just as things were getting lively!" he said. Something like a woman's shriek came through the air. Then shouts, a howl, a dull whack upon the balcony outside that made Bailey jump, and then the report of a gun.

"This is precious hard on an invalid," said Bailey.

But more was to happen yet in his picture. In fact, a great deal more. The Malay appeared again, running now along the bank upstream. His stride had more swing and less pace in it than before. He was threatening someone ahead with the ugly krees he carried. The blade, Bailey noticed, was dull—it did not shine as steel should.

Then came the tall, fair man, brandishing a boathook, and after him three other men in boating costume running clumsily with oars. The man with the grey hat and red belt was not with them. After an interval the three men with the gun reappeared, still in the corn, but now near the river bank. They emerged upon the towing-path, and hurried after the others. The opposite bank was left blank and desolate again.

The sick-room was disgraced by more profanity. "I would give my life to see the end of this," said Bailey. There were indistinct shouts upstream. Once they seemed to be coming nearer, but they disappointed him.

Bailey sat and grumbled. He was still grumbling when his eye caught something black and round among the waves.

"Hullo!" he said. He looked narrowly and saw two triangular black bodies frothing every now and then about a yard in front of this.

He was still doubtful when the little band of pursuers came into sight again, and began to point to this floating

Mrs. Green came in and sat down, panting.

object. They were talking eagerly. Then the man with the gun took aim.

"He's swimming the river, by George!" said Bailey.

The Malay looked round, saw the gun, and went under. He came up so close to Bailey's bank of the river that one of the bars of the balcony hid him for a moment. As he emerged the man with the gun fired. The Malay kept steadily onward—Bailey could see the wet hair on his forehead now and the krees between his teeth—and was presently hidden by the balcony.

This seemed to Bailey an unendurable wrong. The man

was lost him for ever now, so he thought. Why couldn't the brute have got himself decently caught on the opposite bank, or shot in the water?

"It's worse than *Edwin Drood*," said Bailey.

Over the river, too, things had become an absolute blank. All seven men had gone downstream again, probably to get the boat and follow across. Bailey listened and waited. There was silence. "Surely it's not over like this," said Bailey.

Five minutes passed—ten minutes. Then a tug with two barges went upstream. The attitudes of the men upon these were the attitudes of those who see nothing remarkable in earth, water or sky. Clearly the whole affair had passed out of sight of the river. Probably the hunt had gone into the beech woods behind the house.

"Confound it!" said Bailey. "To be continued again, and no chance this time of the sequel. But this is hard on a sick man."

He heard a step on the staircase behind him, and looking round saw the door open. Mrs. Green came in and sat down, panting. She still had her bonnet on, her purse in her hand, and her little brown basket upon her arm. "Oh, there!" she said, and left Bailey to imagine the rest.

"Have a little whisky and water, Mrs. Green, and tell me about it," said Bailey.

Sipping a little, the lady began to recover her powers of explanation.

One of those black creatures at the Fitzgibbon's had gone mad, and was running about with a big knife, stabbing people. He had killed a groom, and stabbed the under-butler, and almost cut the arm off a boating gentleman.

"Running amuck with a krees," said Bailey. "I thought that was it."

And he was hiding in the wood when she came through it from the town.

"What! Did he run after you?" asked Bailey, with a certain touch of glee in his voice.

She broke off suddenly and glared over him at the window.

"No, that was the horrible part of it," Mrs. Green explained. She had been right through the woods and had *never known he was there.* It was only when she met young Mr. Fitzgibbon carrying his gun in the shrubbery that she heard anything about it. Apparently, what upset Mrs. Green was the lost opportunity for emotion. She was determined, however, to make the most of what was left her.

"To think he was there all the time!" she said, over and over again.

Bailey endured this patiently enough for perhaps ten minutes. At last he thought it advisable to assert himself. "It's twenty past one, Mrs. Green," he said. "Don't you think it time you got me something to eat?"

This brought Mrs. Green suddenly to her knees.

"Oh Lord, sir!" she said. "Oh! don't go making me go out of this room, sir, till I know he's caught. He might have got into the house, sir. He might be creeping, creeping, with that knife of his, along the passage this very——"

She broke off suddenly and glared over him at the window. Her lower jaw dropped. Bailey turned his head sharply.

For the space of half a second things seemed just as they were. There was the tree, the balcony, the shining river, the distant church tower. Then he noticed that the acacia was displaced about a foot to the right, and that it was quivering, and the leaves were rustling. The tree was shaken violently, and a heavy panting was audible.

In another moment a hairy brown hand had appeared and clutched the balcony railings, and in another the face of the Malay was peering through these at the man on the couch. His expression was an unpleasant grin, by reason of the krees he held between his teeth, and he was bleeding from an ugly wound in his cheek. His hair wet to drying stuck out like horns from his head. His body was bare save for the wet trousers that clung to him. Bailey's first impulse was to spring from the couch, but his legs reminded him that this was impossible.

By means of the balcony and tree the man slowly raised himself until he was visible to Mrs. Green. With a choking cry she made for the door and fumbled with the handle.

Bailey thought swiftly and clutched a medicine bottle in either hand. One he flung, and it smashed against the acacia. Silently and deliberately, and keeping his bright eyes fixed on Bailey, the Malay clambered into the balcony. Bailey, still clutching his second bottle, but with a sickening, sinking feeling about his heart, watched first one leg come over the railing and then the other.

It was Bailey's impression that the Malay took about an hour to get his second leg over the rail. The period that elapsed before the sitting position was changed to a standing one seemed enormous—days, weeks, possibly a year or so.

It was Bailey's impression that the Malay took about an hour to get his second leg over the rail.

With a gasping groan the dying man succeeded in clutching the bed-clothes with his disabled hand.

Yet Bailey had no clear impression of anything going on in his mind during that vast period, except a vague wonder at his inability to throw the second medicine bottle. Suddenly the Malay glanced over his shoulder. There was the crack of a rifle. He flung up his arms and came down upon the couch. Mrs. Green began a dismal shriek that seemed likely to last till Doomsday. Bailey stared at the brown body with its shoulder blade driven in, that writhed painfully across his legs, rapidly staining and soaking the spotless bandages. Then he looked at the long krees, with the reddish streaks upon its blade, that lay an inch beyond the trembling brown fingers upon the floor. Then at Mrs. Green, who had backed hard against the door and was staring at the body and shrieking in gusty outbursts as if she would wake the dead. And then the body was shaken by one last convulsive effort.

The Malay gripped the krees, tried to raise himself with his left hand, and collapsed. Then he raised his head, stared for a moment at Mrs. Green, and twisting his face round looked at Bailey. With a gasping groan the dying man succeeded in clutching the bed-clothes with his disabled hand, and by a violent effort, which hurt Bailey's legs exceedingly, writhed sideways towards what must be his last victim. Then something seemed released in Bailey's mind and he brought down the second bottle with all his strength on to the Malay's face. The krees fell heavily upon the floor.

"Easy with those legs," said Bailey, as young Fitzgibbon and one of the boating party lifted the body off him.

Young Fitzgibbon was very white in the face. "I didn't mean to kill him," he said.

"It's just as well," said Bailey.

Looking out towards the school . . . he suddenly beheld a fire.

[See page 169

HYLTON CLEAVER

★

Forget-me-not

DUNSTER held in his hand a letter. With it he made a solemn gesture of despair. From the depths of an arm-chair Moon glanced up.

"The what-d'you-call-it tolls the knell of passing what's-his-name. The who-jah homeward wend their weary what-not. That," he made remark, "is called Gray's *Elegy*. A melancholy rhyme if ever one was written."

"It's not a rhyme at all," said Borrodaile, "the way you say it. Well, what about it anyhow?"

"Dunster looks as though he were just going to recite it, and it always makes me sad."

"I'm not going to recite, don't worry," Dunster said. "I'm going to leave."

"*Leave?*"

"Leave. Things have been going rottenly at home. They can't afford to keep me here, and someone's offered me a job. I've got to go into an office, right away. This is a letter telling me."

"Bad luck," said Borrodaile. "Bad luck indeed."

Moon rose, and took a few steps up and down the room: then, as if feeling called upon to speak, he did so.

"Let me point out, old boy, a ray of sunshine in this sad calamity. When I first came to Greyminster, winsome as I was, I can remember finding some chap here who had left my

preparatory school a term before I had. The result was he knew all the ropes, and he was able to make me a proper fool."

"That wasn't very difficult," said Borrodaile, with some contempt.

"Had it been difficult," said Moon, "this chap could not have done it. But the point is that sooner or later we've all got to start away into the great wide world. For all he knows I might go to the very office Dunster's bound for now, and so maybe he's lucky to be going on ahead. By the time I arrive, he'll be thoroughly at home, and then," he added, turning handsomely to Dunster, "you'll be glad you left, and got a start like that. You'll look upon me as a new boy in the city life, and you'll be able to shove mud and blotting paper in my ink-pot."

Dunster turned dismally.

"I see. Then somebody who started in the office last year will be waiting, I suppose, for me. And he'll shove mud and blotting paper in *my* ink-pot, will he? I'll look out for that."

"It would be just as well," said Moon, not too well pleased at the way his compensating arguments had been received.

"In any case," Dunster complained, "it isn't starting in an office that I mind. It's leaving here so suddenly. I've always wanted, ever since I came, to do something by which other chaps would remember me after I'd gone; and now I'll never do it."

"You ran me out," said Moon, "twice in a single House match. Be sure *I* shall remember you for *that*."

"You're very funny; but you haven't got to leave. I have. I'm seventeen, and I've no colours. I've done nothing for the school worth anybody's notice. Look how some things chaps do are handed down as history year after year, until everyone who comes to school here knows them. Ashburner's mile. Forrest, who lost his memory, and thought he was still captain of cricket here two years after he'd left. Barnard's five tries against Rainhurst, and Sutherland's two hundred runs against M.C.C. Some chaps leave here and ten years afterwards

"I've done nothing for the school worth anybody's notice."

you've only got to bring their name up and everyone will answer: 'Yes, he was the chap who did this, or did that.' "

"You'll be the chap who didn't," Moon agreed. "I can quite see your point."

"I always longed to do one big thing before I left," persisted Dunster. "I don't expect a stained-glass window in the hall. . . ."

"How would you like a cattle-trough or two about the cricket field?"

Dunster made an angry gesture.

"You don't understand. But I tell you I'd be the happiest man alive if I thought there was something here they would call after *me* . . . like Tennant's Corner or Macmillan's Bridge."

"I tell you what," Moon mentioned in a quiet but friendly tone. "Suppose you leave your bowler hanging on the hat-peg here. It can be handed on then, through generation after

generation; one day it will go all green and get all over dust."

"What good would that be? I've not done anything unusual to that hat."

"Well, I could say it was your bonnet, and that you kept bees in it."

"All right," said Dunster savagely. "Your turn will come. One day *you'll* leave. At least I hope so for the school's sake. What do you think they're likely to call after you?"

"'Get your hair cut!' or 'How's your father?' I expect," said Moon. "I shall go quietly in a cab, and pull the blinds."

"Well, I can't help it," Dunster said depressingly. "I've got to leave, and I want people to remember me."

"The best way, then, will be," said Moon with cold finality, "to leave owing a lot of people money. They won't be likely to forget you then."

Whereupon he picked up his books, and, spreading them around him, settled down to work. But Dunster slowly made his way towards the door, hands in his pockets, and went out.

When he had closed the door behind him, Borrodaile stirred in his chair. He was an earnest-looking soul in glasses.

"I don't mind telling you," he said, glaring at Moon, "I'm sorry for the chap. If I could see a way, I'd try to help him get his wish. I would indeed."

"You're a good fellow, Borrodaile," Moon made reply. "Or fairly so. And yet when I look back upon your record I should be sorry for the chap you tried to help. I've never known you try to do a good turn yet but, in the end, you muffed it."

Dunster went slowly on his way.

He had been only three years at the school, and now his course was run. He was not altogether unprepared, yet he could see now that throughout his time at Greyminster he had been much too lazy. He had missed chances by the dozen, he had failed utterly to make his mark. Now it was too late. All he could do was to go round the school, and tell his friends the news. In twelve months' time he would be utterly forgotten.

It was a thought that seared his soul. Forgotten!

Soon he was at a study door beyond which he had friends. He knocked and entered.

"Chaps," he said tragically, "I'm leaving."

"I'd like your box of compasses in that case," one chap instantly replied.

"And what about your basket-chair?" inquired another. "I suppose you won't be taking that?"

Dunster looked from one to the other with sardonic pride. Presently he sat down upon the table, and he nodded.

"It's wretched to think what an ordinary sort of cove I've proved. Never done anything. That's me. This time next year no one will even know whether I was a batsman or a bowler."

"For my own part," one of those present murmured, "I don't know even now."

Dunster looked at him narrowly.

"Quite likely," he confessed. "I've been a failure. I admit it. I've done nothing thrilling. My name won't be associated here with any pots . . . or rags."

"No bones or bottles, cast-off wearing apparel or false teeth," a voice put in. "But you've a decent kettle and that reminds me that I'd like it when you go."

Dunster stood up again.

"All this just goes to prove it," he said bitterly. "If I'd done anything to be remembered, you'd be sorry I was going."

One friend at last looked up in sympathy.

"Oh, what's the use of taking it so hard? Chaps leave here every term. It doesn't mean you're going to die. In six years' time there probably won't be a single fellow in the school who's here today. But life'll go on just the same. We shall be able to come back here, all of us, wearing our old Grey ties, and smoking pipes, and criticize the way the youngsters shape at footer. Nothing much happens here, in any case. Things only start to happen when you leave."

"That's my complaint. I wanted something pretty good to happen whilst I was at school, so that the name of Dunster would live on. If you do things when you're an Old Boy,

people here don't think half so much of it as they do if you'd done something when you were here by which they can remember you. . . . Well," he concluded sorrowfully, "I'll get along. I'll come and see you all before I go."

Out he went, and the door was gently closed. He walked a little farther down the passage, and knocked upon another door. He opened it dramatically.

"Chaps," he announced, "I'm leaving."

"Just as quickly as you like," replied the owner of the study, not so much as looking up from work. "And close the door behind you when you go."

Dunster obeyed with haste. He had visited the wrong place that time, by mistake. That was the senior prefect of the house. He looked round to make sure which door he had intended to select and, as he hesitated, a young man came quickly down the passage and in a confidential manner accosted him.

"I say, I hear you're leaving, old man. I'm sorry."

"Thank you very much indeed," said Dunster with the greatest cordiality.

"But, at the same time, it may turn out to be a blessing in disguise. You'll be home by tomorrow, I suppose, and they'll give you whatever money you may need before you start away again. I'm in a different state entirely. I'm in a hole. I haven't got a bean, and I owe the tuck-shop eighteenpence, and Stanton half a dollar. He's pressing for it, and I thought that if you're really leaving then you won't be needing any pocket money, and perhaps you'd lend me what you had left. It would be jolly decent of you," he said hopefully, "and I can tell you this, that it would be the kind of thing I'd not be likely to forget. I shall always remember you."

"Are you quite sure?" asked Dunster earnestly.

"Yes, if you lend me something."

Dunster made an irritable gesture.

"I can't lend you anything. I haven't got a bean myself. That's why I'm leaving. I thought you meant you would remember me . . . in any case."

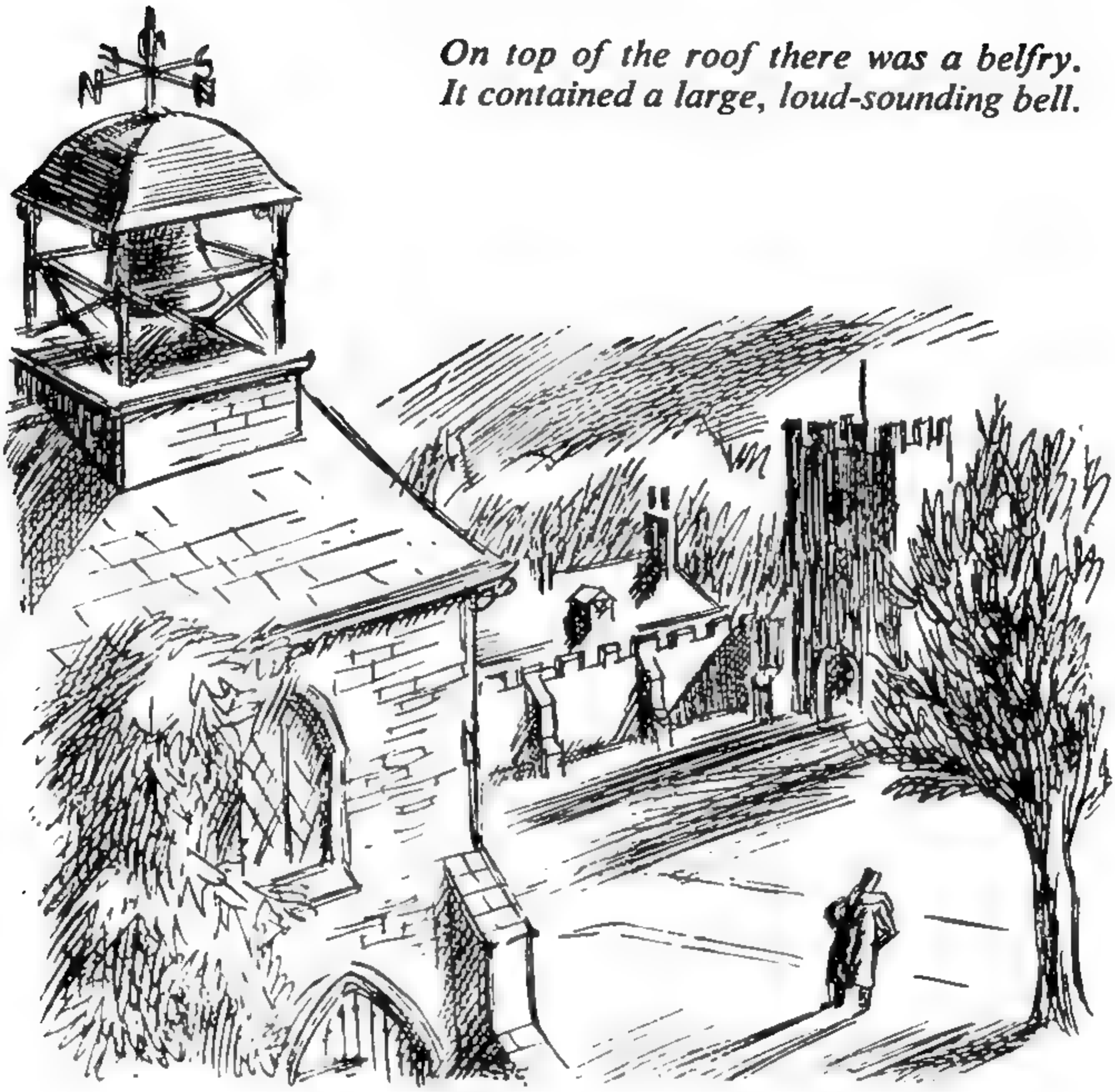
A young man . . . in a confidential manner accosted him.

The other drew himself up with an icy calm, and looked at Dunster through contemptuous eyes.

"The only thing I shall recollect about you," he said hastily, "in any case, is that you were the kind of fellow anybody would be thankful to forget."

Dunster remained alone, bowed with depression. It was no use to call at any other study. No one wanted to remember him. Nevertheless, they *should*. His mind was now made up. He would force them to notice him. The whole school should re-echo with his name. DUNSTER! The cry should be, whether the school liked it or not, on everybody's lips before this time tomorrow. He should write the name in capital letters in school history. How to do it? How? That was the point.

He went and leaned upon the window-sill and thoughtfully looked out. His sad eyes travelled doggedly first down the east wing of the school, then down the west. He looked up at the steeple; he gazed in a mournful manner round the playing-



On top of the roof there was a belfry.
It contained a large, loud-sounding bell.

fields, the school pavilion, and the baths, the gym, the covered fives-courts. He glanced along the roofs of the outhouses, and his eyes gradually came to rest upon the corner building of the lot, for they had been attracted to the roof. He stayed there and he stared at that roof, lost in thought. In one more moment his mind was made up. He turned and started back along the passage. Everyone was jolly funny over his misfortunes; they thought he would prove nothing but a lone ship passing in the night. Not so, by any means.

At the first corner he came face to face with Borrodaile, who stopped and looked up at him sympathetically.

"Well, old chap. Still feeling blue?"

"Not quite so blue," said Dunster. "I've just hit upon a scheme. Do you know what I'm going to do tonight?"

Borrodaile looked all bright.

"I've not the ghost of an idea."

Thereupon Dunster came close and in a confidential whisper told him.

It was the dead of night. On either side of Dunster's bed people lay breathing heavily.

Dunster pushed back the bed-clothes, then, with the greatest care, thrust one bare foot out of bed, and finally stood upright upon the mat. With ears pricked for the slightest sign that he was waking anybody up, he clad himself in coat and trousers, and tied a muffler round his neck, slipped on a pair of rubber shoes and made his way on tiptoe down the dormitory. Once he tripped up over somebody's slippers. He even barked his knee upon a bed, but the deep breathing went on without change, and he arrived eventually at the door; he opened it cautiously, heard the faint click as he closed it again behind him, then started down the stairs. Finally there was a window.

He opened this, climbed out, and dropped down softly on the gravel path outside, then, turning, cut across the lawn, out by the gate, and struck the pathway to the school. There was a full moon, and the night was gloriously clear; the school was silhouetted in all majesty against the sky; he could see all the sparkling windows, and the shadows where the ivy clung. But at the first bend in the pathway there came in view a much more interesting sight; it was the corner outhouse of the string of buildings which comprised the gym, baths, and the covered fives-court, and the corner building was a high one; on top of the roof there was a belfry. It contained a large, loud-sounding bell, and strictly speaking it was the Greyminster fire-alarm.

Dunster was going to climb, by devious routes, on to that roof and get into the belfry, then he was going to ring that

bell, and keep on ringing it until the whole school, boys and masters, staff, birds in the ivy, and even the villagers, had been aroused. He was quite ready to believe that this was not the first time anybody had set out to ring that bell by night, but there would be this difference anyhow. If any other gay young spark, in past years, had rung that bell, he must have done it solely for his own amusement and for that of his friends; he would have scrambled down and run away immediately after, and there would be the usual hue and cry and rumours all next day as to the fellow who had really done it. This was where Dunster meant to be exceptional. He meant to ring that bell until all was blue, and stop there until the whole population of the place turned out in night attire and gathered round him, gazing up, and then he would address that crowd, still clinging to the bell-rope, in these words:

"Listen, I'm Dunster! You don't all know me, but that is my name. I'm Dunster, and I'm leaving. I want you to remember I was here, and when, in years to come, somebody says to you, 'Was there a chap called Dunster at your school?', I want you all to answer up, and say, 'Yes, Dunster was the chap who rang the bell at night to tell us he was going, and to say goodbye.'"

That was what he would say, and, having said that, he presumed there would not be much time for more. Somebody would have got a ladder by then, he supposed, and he would be grabbed by the collar and brought down. That wouldn't matter. He would have gained his hour of fame, and there was nothing they could do. It would be no use to expel him, or give him lines or to put him in detention, for on the morrow he would leave. All they could do would be to whack him, and that wouldn't matter, for it would be worth it, and would give added lustre to his name.

He went over these facts as he made his lonely way across the playing-fields: his heart was beating wildly, but he was unafraid. He was keyed up to do or die.

At last he arrived and he surveyed the methods by which he could reach the roof from which to make his farewell speech.

Finally he selected a first foothold, and he started the ascent. And whilst he clambered up, with one hand in the ivy and the other reaching for this ledge or that, as he scratched at the bricks, there came, with similar caution, out by another window of his house a similarly-garbed figure to Dunster. He too dropped down upon the gravel, and set out across the open. It was Borrodaile, and he was going to help.

Dunster had by this time attained the roof. From here he made his way on hands and knees along the sloping tiles towards the belfry, and he had then only to balance himself on some struts and lean out with one hand to reach the bell-rope. He got that bell-rope in his hands, then turned towards the school with a fine air of bold defiance and surveyed it.

With one dramatic gesture he then tugged that bell-rope to him, and the first loud clang rang out. In the still night air it was louder than he had ever expected. Possibly this was because it was close to his ear; in any case, he was nearly knocked off the roof by the shock. He clutched on to those struts, however, with a rare determination, and pulled again.

It was when he was in the act of reaching for a third tug that, looking out towards the school to catch sight of the first uplifted window, he saw instead a sheer phenomenon.

It was the fire bell he was ringing; be quite clear on that. Now, in a corner of the school, he suddenly beheld a fire. At first it was only a spark of light, but, whilst he watched, it broke into a yellow flame; at first a miserable little flame, not much more than a candle-light effect indeed, but all in one exciting moment this had burst into a tongue of fire. Dunster forgot to ring his bell. There was a dull explosion, and then a burst of fierce red flame, and very soon that corner of the school was blazing—literally blazing like a furnace. Greyminster was on fire.

Dunster's heart had stopped. He stared and stared as though he could not possibly believe his eyes. And then the truth began to dawn upon him. He had a great, unprecedented chance. He, Dunster, he alone, stood between Greyminster

and disaster; he it was who could now save countless lives. He took a deep breath, and then he rose to the occasion. He took a new grip of the struts, balanced himself without fear, and grabbed that rope, then gave one violent tug, and forthwith started ringing as though this were his own part in some film play, and the tongues of flame would very soon be licking at his boots.

He pulled that rope as though the safety of all England was depending now upon his strong right arm, and while he pulled the blaze grew yet more fierce and more spectacular. He rang, and rang, and rang. The night knew not one moment's peace. He beat the still air with that bell until at last he literally collapsed from sheer exhaustion; but as he lay across those struts struggling for breath, he saw he had won through, a figure was appearing at the double; he peered down and identified him as the porter, half-dressed, and with his boots unlaced; the porter reached the doors with one last

"Who is up there?" he cried. "Who's there?"

"Dunster, that's who it is. I rang the bell!"

burst of speed, unlocked them in a flurry, and made for the bell-rope. Then he stood with his feet apart, and craned his neck up eagerly.

"Who is up there?" he cried. "Who's there?"

Now it was neck or nothing. Dunster sat slowly up upon his haunches.

"Me! Me!" he cried in answer. "Can't you see the fire? I rang the bell. I tried to rouse the school."

"You . . . You? Who's you? Who is it there, I say?"

"Dunster! That's who it is. I rang the bell! It's Dunster, that's my name!"

"Then," said the porter crisply, "come down here as quick as you can move. I'll have to take you to the Head. You started pulling at that rope afore the fire had started. That's what you did . . . and what I want to know is, how did you guess there was going to be a fire? Well, now I'm going to keep you here . . . and run you in!"

"I didn't know there was going to be a fire," cried Dunster angrily. "I came up for a rag . . . because I'm going to leave here, and I wanted everyone to know, and just as I began to ring the bell I saw the fire . . . so I rang *hard*."

"Never mind, now," the other said. "Rag or no rag, you come down here!"

Dunster remained above.

"Not I!" he cried. "I'm going to stop up here. I've got an absolutely perfect view."

The porter mouthed some vehement complaint, but had no time to lose, and with strong arms he, in his turn, began to ring the bell anew with all his might and main.

"I'll want to know how that fire started!" he cried once in breathless accents. "I don't see yet how we're going to put it out; you won't do that with penny squirts. We'll have to get the engine from the town . . . a fine thing that, and no mistake . . . and how did that fire start? . . . that's what I want to know. Someone set alight to all those shavings, that's what someone did . . . and those shavings have spread to paraffin and petrol in the shed there, and now nobody can stop it."

Dunster did not reply. He was excited beyond words, first by the roaring flames across the playing-fields, and, secondly, by the inspiring spectacle caused by the figure of the porter, half-undressed, but bending to that rope with a zeal and enthusiasm that was truly thrilling to behold.

'I don't know how it's going to end,' he told himself. 'I don't indeed.'

He didn't. But the end was at that moment very near. There came hurrying across the playing-fields another half-clad figure now: it was the Head. Dunster crouched down as low as he could get behind that belfry and stayed motionless. The Head ran up, and halted in the doorway where he could see the porter at his splendid work. Then he lifted one hand and shouted. The porter, sweating like a horse, turned and straightened his aching back.

"Well done," the Head declared. "Well done, indeed. That bell has saved the school!"

Dunster could hear those noble words, and his heart beat with pride. He sat up cautiously, extremely proud.

"Yes," said the Head, "the whole school's roused, and I have telephoned the fire-brigade. The school engine's out, and they have got the hose to work. All thanks to you. Every soul in the place must have been roused before the fire got a

The Head was patting the school-porter on the back.

serious hold. You did not lose a second, you were promptitude itself. I heard the bell myself, and you were ringing like a hero."

Dunster beamed right across his face. He was all ready now at any moment to climb down and tell the truth. He looked down cheerfully meanwhile, and this is what he saw. The Head was patting the school-porter on the back, and the school-porter was replying.

"Why, I just did my duty, sir. That's all."

"Finely done, too," the Head insisted. "I shall report your promptitude in covering the distance to the bell at such top

One more figure loomed up. It was Borrodaile. His glasses were all stained with soot.

speed, and I am sure you will be most highly thought of."

Then the Head turned and started off again, running gently into the night. The porter watched him go with a peculiar expression. Then he looked quaintly up into the belfry. His tone had subtly changed.

"I say," he pleaded. "Just come down a moment, Dunster, will you?"

Dunster considered matters. He had overheard all that the Head had said. At last he clambered down, and stood before the porter shrewdly.

"Did you 'ear what 'e said?"

Dunster inclined his head. "I heard it, yes."

The porter drew a slow breath, and he wiped his forehead with a warm and grimy hand.

"Fair for one," said he, "fair for the other, that's what I always say. You was up 'ere before the fire began, a-ringing

at the bell, but I ain't going to inquire now into that. I'm going to let you go. Never mind how the fire begun. That won't be my affair. But the point's this . . . that bell was rung real prompt, and there'll be a reward. All the while I'm keeping quiet about *you*, you keep quiet too, and remember . . . *it was me who rung that bell.*"

Dunster gazed at him with glazing eyes. "*You* . . . " he began.

"If you don't like the sound of that," the porter said, "then someone will be asking you how it was you come to ring it afore the fire began, and someone's sure to say you must have lit that fire . . . even if you can prove you didn't by the fact that you was here when it began, they'll say you know the chap who lit it."

Dunster stood there defeated. He was a broken man. He was completely bent in two.

"We'll let bygones be bygones," said the porter handsomely. "The Head thinks I was nipping over here to ring the bell in good time. All right. No one shall ever know you rung it. Trust to me."

Dunster turned on his heel. No one should ever know he'd rung it.

He went wretchedly into the night, alone, bowed with despair. Suddenly one more figure loomed up, strange to look upon, out of the darkness. It was Borrodaile. His glasses were all smeared with soot, and he looked smoky, furthermore, from head to foot. The pupils of his eyes alone were white, and they stared hopelessly at Dunster.

"Come here," he said excitedly. "I've got to tell you. I've been waiting here to stop you going by. That blaze all round the workshops. *I* did that! I lit that fire for you. I'd seen those shavings there, and that varnish and paint, and I remembered when you said about ringing the bell that it would burn; I meant to start a little tiny fire just to give you a fair excuse to ring the bell . . . it was my own idea."

Dunster heard him with irony, stared at him once, then tossed his head and made this answer:

"You poor simp. You let me ring the bell before you lit the fire. You did it all the wrong way round. The whole idea from start to finish . . . every detail of the plan has absolutely come unstuck. You've never got to mention this to anybody; if you do, there'll be a frightful row, and everybody . . . everybody here will be expelled . . . expelled, I say."

Borrodaile spread his scarred and tortured hands.

"I never meant the fire to spread like this. I didn't know they'd got a lot of petrol there, and the paraffin inside that little shed. The wind got up and set the shed alight, and the tins kept on blowing up. I tried to get them out, and nearly killed myself. And now I can't let anybody know the good work I put in. I risked my life, and nobody will ever know. Look at those flames, twenty-foot high. I tried to hold them back!"

Dunster brushed him impatiently upon one side.

"I can't help that," he snapped. "I'm through."

"Through what?"

"I'm finished. Done. I'm going back to bed."

Time passed. The fire-engines arrived, and fought those flames. They doused the flames with water, and they doused the school. At last the flames were well in hand, and they were gradually choked down and defeated. Dawn came at last.

Through the long hours of waiting there had been one question on a lot of people's lips. The question was: "Where's that chap Dunster? He was missing at the roll."

At dawn they found him, and Dunster secured his fame, because the comic part about it all is this: that now, if anybody ever says, "Did you know anyone called Dunster at the school?", what do you think the answer is?

"Dunster?" they say. "Oh, rather. Why, he was a chap who, when the school caught fire, and every soul turned out to watch the blaze, slept through the whole shemozzle, and said he never knew, next morning, that there'd been a fire at all."

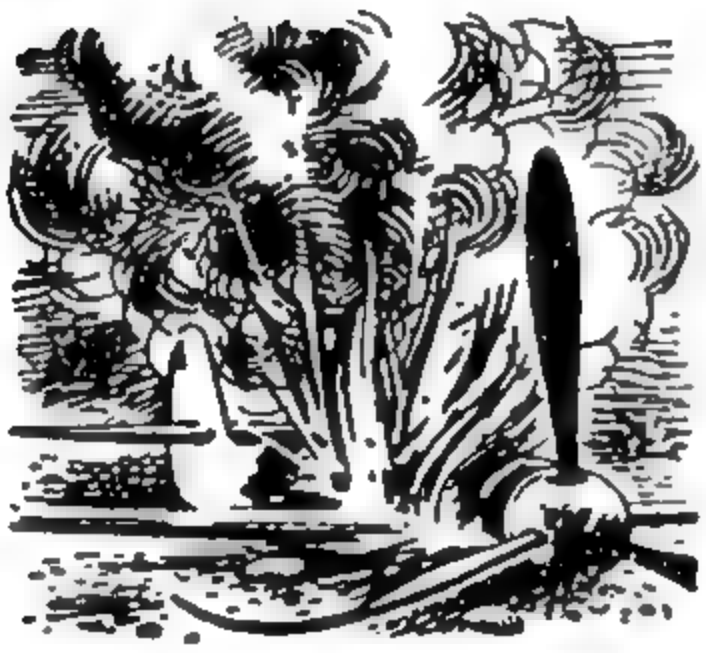
That's what they say, and Dunster knows it.

He hasn't been forgotten after all.

CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

★

The case of the unknown aircraft



IT was unusual for Air Commodore Raymond to walk unannounced into the Operations' Room of the Air Police Service; for which reason Biggles, who was at work on his records, raised his eyebrows and stood up when the Air Commodore strode in. Air Constables Ginger Hebblethwaite and Bertie Lissie also sprang to their feet, Bertie dropping his eyeglass in his agitation but catching it deftly.

"All right, you fellows, sit down," said the Air Commodore quickly. "Bigglesworth, I want you to fly up to Scotland right away."

"Very good, sir," acknowledged Biggles, closing his books.

"The job's top priority. I assume you have an aircraft standing by at the airfield?"

"Lacey's on duty there," stated Biggles. "I can get him on the phone and he'll have any machine I want ready by the time I get there."

"I am afraid there'll be a long walk involved in getting where I want you to go," said the Air Commodore apologetically. "There's no aerodrome within twenty miles. Lossiemouth is probably as near as any. You could get a car from there, but it means a long walk at the finish."

Biggles looked alarmed. "I'm not much for walking," he protested. "Life's too short."

"I know, I know; that's why I mentioned it."

"If you'll tell me the trouble, sir, maybe I can think of something to save the soles of my feet," suggested Biggles.

"Your objective lies in the Cairngorms, which, as you've probably flown over them in your time, you may recall are a pretty formidable group of mountains in Scotland."

Biggles smiled faintly. "Is it at the top or the bottom? I'm nothing for climbing, but I don't mind walking downhill."

"It's about halfway up—on the slope of Ben Macdhui, to be precise."

"What's happened there?"

"That's what I'd like to know," replied the Air Commodore grimly. "I mean, I know what's happened. I want to know why. This is the story as it has been given to me. Two days ago a gillie out watching deer was caught in a sudden fog—a not unusual event—and sat down to wait for it to lift. Sitting there he heard an aircraft flying low. Then he heard it crash. Taking a chance of losing his way, he made for the direction of the sound. He found the machine in flames. He couldn't get near it, so he set off down the mountain to fetch help. The police at Aviemore phoned the Air Ministry. There was nothing particularly remarkable about this. It's happened before, and will happen again while pilots try to take short-cuts through clouds that have rocks in them. The Cairngorms are liable to get in the way of anyone flying below five thousand feet.

"The usual procedure was taken. An R.A.F. Alpine Rescue Squad went up. By the time they got there the fire was out. Luckily there had been rain, so the heather was wet; otherwise the whole area would have been burnt out. The machine was a single-seater, so there was only one body in it, burnt, as usual, beyond recognition. We now come to the mystery. No machine had been reported missing. The R.A.F. had only a few machines out on that day and all

"What's happened there?" asked Biggles.

returned safely to base. Air-line operators don't use single-seaters, so they don't come into it. Every private owner has been contacted and accounted for. The problem that arose, therefore, was where did this machine come from, where was it going, and who was flying it? The Air Ministry Inspector of Accidents sent a man up to look at it. He's just back, and all he's done is put an even more sinister aspect on the thing."

The Air Commodore took a cigarette from his case.

"This man states that the machine is of no type known to us. That in itself is a staggerer, although, of course, there's just a chance that he is in error, as would be understandable owing to the state of the crash. Apparently this unknown pilot flew head-on into the side of the mountain, with results you can well imagine. All that's left is a tangled heap of scrap. The fire did the rest."

"What about the engine?" put in Biggles. "That would still be in one piece and it should tell us something."

"Believe it or not, the Air Ministry has been unable to identify it. All we know is, it's a twelve-cylinder, air-cooled radial that probably developed something in the order of a thousand horse-power. Judging from what remains of the tanks, it must have carried a big load of fuel. A long-range job, obviously. But even on the engine it hasn't been possible to find a mark or a number."

Biggles looked incredulous.

"You might well stare," said the Air Commodore.

"It must have been a special job for secret work, or possibly a prototype that never went into production," opined Biggles. "Even so, you'd think there would be a mark somewhere."

"The rest of the story tends to confirm that it might have been a special job for top-secret work," went on the Air Commodore slowly. "The officer from the Accidents Board found in the wreckage a lump of metal which, although it had been melted by the heat to an irregular mass, he could not place as a component part of either the airframe or engine. It was as heavy as lead, which again seemed odd, because you don't find lumps of lead incorporated in an aeroplane, in which lightness is an important factor. He brought this metal down with him. It has just been identified, and when I tell you what it is, you'll believe me when I say that the atomic research people, and their security guards, are fairly rocking on their heels."

"What is this stuff?"

"Uranium."

Biggles let out a low whistle. "Suffering Icarus! That certainly is a bone-shaker. Have our atomic people lost any?"

"No."

"What about America?"

"We're in touch with them, but so far we haven't received a reply. The stuff was certainly stolen from an official source somewhere, because it's virtually impossible for a civilian to get hold of any."

"This lump must be worth a lot of money."

"It is, but the intrinsic value is secondary. It's the fact

that an unauthorized person was flying across this country with a quantity in his possession that has sent the balloon up."

"What has happened to the body?" asked Biggles.

"It was brought down, and was buried today in the nearest churchyard."

"And there was absolutely no clue, nothing in the pockets, that might give a line to the man's nationality?"

"Nothing. Only one thing remained in his clothing that was not destroyed by fire; but it was not without significance. It was a Luger automatic pistol. It had been loaded, but the cartridges had exploded in the heat. Respectable peace-time pilots don't carry automatic weapons."

"Quite. He was ready for trouble apparently—but not the sort he met." Biggles tapped a cigarette slowly on the back of his hand. "Just what do you want me to do about this?"

"I want you to find out who this man was and where he was going."

"That's a tall order, with only a charred corpse and some buckled longerons to work on."

"Had it been a simple one, it's unlikely that the case would have been brought to us," answered the Air Commodore, a trifle bitterly.

Biggles thought for a minute. "Tell me this," he requested. "Are these Alpine Rescue fellows still on the spot?"

"Yes. They're standing by, waiting for orders."

"The Air Ministry will be in touch with them by radio, I imagine?"

"Yes."

"Then for a start, will you ask the Ministry to tell these chaps to stay where they are until I get there, after which they must be withdrawn? I shan't need them. If that signal can be sent in code so much the better. There's just a chance someone else may be listening."

"I'll do that."

"One other point. Has this story got into the newspapers?"

"Not yet, but the evening papers have got hold of it and

they are putting out a story about an aircraft, at present unidentified, crashing in the Cairngorms."

"They're not saying exactly *where* in the Cairngorms?"

"No. They don't know."

"Then I'd like them to."

The Air Commodore looked rather surprised, but he agreed. "All right. If that's how you want it, I'll arrange it. I'll let them know that the crash lies halfway up the western slope of Ben Macdhui."

"You can also tell them that the body has been brought down and the guard withdrawn."

The Air Commodore's eyebrows went up. "Why?"

Biggles smiled. "Just a little idea of mine. I suppose it isn't difficult to spot the crash?"

"The wreckage is scattered over half an acre."

Biggles got up. "Okay, sir. I'll see what I can do about it."

"Don't be too long over it, or I'm likely to lose my job," declared the Air Commodore, as he went out.

"Well, stuff me with suet pudding! He doesn't want much," snorted Bertie, after the door had closed.

"I must admit this looks like a poser," admitted Biggles. "Well, let's get on with it. The first thing is to get to the crash."

"But here, I say, old boy, that means climbing up the beastly mountain," protested Bertie.

"I'm not climbing up any mountains," stated Biggles. "Ginger, ring Algy and tell him to have the Proctor ready to take off in half an hour, with four parachutes. He won't need one himself; he's Duty Officer, so he'll have to come back, but we'll need to drop some stores. If we get cracking we should just be able to reach the objective in daylight."

"What's the idea?" asked Ginger. "What are we going to look for when we get there?"

"Nothing in particular," Biggles told him. "I hope somebody else will come looking for something, though—a lump of uranium, for instance. Get your brains weaving. This

unlucky pilot wasn't just cruising about on his own account with a lump of atomic energy in his pocket. Unless I'm mistaken he was only the errand-boy. Somebody is going to get worried. When he reads in the papers that an unidentified plane has hit the carpet in Scotland, he'll know, or he'll think he knows, where his precious lump of uranium is lying. What will he do? I'll give you one guess."

"Go to look for it," answered Ginger promptly.

"Right first time," acknowledged Biggles. "I want to be there when he gets there. Which is why, to save time, I asked the Air Commodore to tell him, through the papers, just where the crash is lying. With a little encouragement this fellow may be induced to tell us what our security people must be panting to know—where the uranium started from and where it was going. Come on, let's get mobile. Bring your binoculars, Ginger. We're going to the wide open spaces!"

The sun was setting in a clear, windless sky, behind the rugged Monadhliath Mountains of Inverness-shire, when the police machine arrived over the remains of the ill-fated aircraft which, lying in the middle of a blackened area of heather, were plain to see. The Proctor circled once, and then made a straight run at little more than stalling speed across the gently sloping flank of the mountain. In quick succession four objects dropped from its escape hatch; first a large bundle, then three figures that were Biggles, Ginger and Bertie. As soon as Biggles, who had dropped last, had left the machine, the engine resumed its normal note and stood away to the south.

Ginger, after stumbling and falling in a sea of purple heather, picked himself up, stepped out of his harness, and turned to find himself the object of critical scrutiny by half a dozen stalwart young men in Air Force blue.

"Is that the way you usually get around?" asked one, grinning.

"More or less," answered Ginger casually. "As in this case, it is sometimes easier than walking."

"Are you telling me?" returned the Rescue man.

The arrival of Biggles on the scene put an end to facetious conversation. "Who's in charge here?" he asked briefly.

A corporal stepped forward. "I am, sir."

"I see. My name's Bigglesworth. Have you had a signal from the Air Ministry about me?"

"Yes, sir. I'm to take your orders," reported the corporal.

"They are quite simple," answered Biggles. "You can pack up and go home. I'm taking over."

"That suits me," declared the corporal. "A couple of days here have been long enough."

"Did you bring a tent?"

"No, we've made a rough bivvy by those big rocks." The airman pointed.

"Any rations left?"

"Some tins of bully, biscuit, tea, sugar and condensed milk."

"Fine. You can leave them. I'll send a chit to the Air Ministry when I get back to say I took them over. Seen anybody about?"

"Not a soul since the Accidents Branch Officer departed."

"Okay. If you look lively you'll be off the hill before it gets dark."

The corporal turned away, and in a few minutes he and his crew could be seen striding down the hill in single file.

"And now, what's the drill, old boy?" asked Bertie.

"The drill is, for a start, you can go and collect the bundle of stores we dropped. It fell over there." He pointed. "Then we'll go and have a look at the corporal's bivouac, brew a dish of tea on the spirit-stove, and keeping under cover make ourselves comfortable. We'll take turns at mounting guard. Those rocks seem to be just the right distance away from the crash. No noise. Sounds carry a long way in this still air."

Biggles walked on towards the rocks, looking at the wreckage in passing. "What a mess!" he breathed. "That pilot couldn't have been very bright, or he'd have known what was in front of him. Maps aren't expensive."

In quick succession four objects dropped from its escape hatch.

Ginger stopped to look at the spot where the unknown pilot must have been hurled from life to death in an instant of time without knowing anything about it. He gazed around. Even on a summer evening, the landscape, with its brooding silence, was one of utter loneliness and mournful melancholy. The only sign of life was a grouse-cock, sitting on a rock two hundred yards away, watching him with deep suspicion. On three sides rose the purple giants of the Highlands, their outlines softened by distance and an imperceptible mist that had already filled the corries. Far below, the valleys were pools of sombre shadows. It was, he pondered, an appropriate setting for tragedy and the vigil they were about to undertake.

Turning away he followed Biggles to the bivouac, which turned out to be no more than a flattened pile of heather in a slight depression, with a primitive fireplace built of stones. A spring bubbled near at hand.

"When do you reckon this chap's likely to show up, if he's coming?" Bertie was asking.

"I couldn't guess," replied Biggles. "If he starts from somewhere close, he should be here fairly soon; but he may have to come from the Continent. Be sure he'll get here as soon as possible, because the longer the delay the greater will be the chance of someone finding the uranium. He'll know where to come because the exact location of the crash must have appeared in the papers some hours ago. The question is, will he come by night or by day? Both times have advantages and disadvantages. By night it would be more difficult to find the stuff, by day there would be more chance of being spotted by someone. I'd say he'll try his luck in the dark. If he fails, then he'll wait for daylight. We'll take two-hour watches. There's nothing else we can do. The wreck can tell us nothing we don't already know. You'll take the first watch, Bertie. Keep an eye on the skylines but don't show yourself." Biggles lay back and lit a cigarette.

Ginger woke with a start and found himself in a world of shadowy moonlight. Biggles was squeezing his arm.

"What goes on?" whispered Ginger, awake on the instant and remembering where he was.

"Ssh! Someone's coming."

Ginger raised himself to a sitting position. "Where?"

"Can't see him yet. Twice a rolling stone has rattled on the scree below us."

"What's the time?"

"Half-past one."

Nothing more was said. Ginger crouched beside Biggles. A yard away Bertie lay flat behind a stone. Several minutes passed in a silence that was profound. It was broken by a sudden whirr of wings as a brood of grouse hurtled past.

Ginger didn't move, but his nerves grew taut as his eyes strove to probe the shadowy world in the direction from which the birds had come. What had disturbed them—a fox, a wild cat—or a man?

It was a man. Presently he saw him, a mere outline against the colourless background, a silhouette that hardened as it drew nearer. Boots swished in brittle, sun-dried heather. Then came the sound of heavy breathing as the figure, toiling uphill and at a distance of perhaps forty yards, suddenly altered its direction towards the scene of the fatal accident. Now it was possible to make out a face, pallid in the moonlight. Once the man stopped to gaze around, as if to make sure that he was alone. Then he went on again, quickly now, and presently the sound of metal scraping against metal told the watchers that he'd reached his objective and had begun his search. His purpose was no longer in doubt.

Biggles drew the others to him and, cupping his hands round his mouth, whispered: "Bertie, work round behind him in case he sees us and bolts. He'll run downhill if he goes. Ginger, come with me. Keep close. No noise."

Fortunately the man himself was by this time making enough noise to drown the lesser sounds that their movements might cause.

Biggles crawled forward through the heather, feeling his way, stopping frequently. Ginger followed in like manner at

his heels. He couldn't see the man, but he could hear him all the time as he searched within the charred and twisted wreckage. Nearer and nearer they drew, until they, too, were at the crash. And still the man was obviously unaware of their presence. Biggles touched Ginger on the arm and pointed. Grasping the meaning of the signal, Ginger worked his way to the far side of the gaunt skeleton of what had been an aircraft. Then came a pause.

It was broken in dramatic fashion. Biggles's voice cut through the hush like a whip lash. "Come out of that!" he ordered.

A shuddering intake of breath told Ginger the extent of the shock the words inflicted. There was a wild rush as the man scrambled out on his side. "Take it easy!" rapped out Ginger. The man spun round, and crouched as if to run; but Bertie rose up from the heather and the man remained motionless. They all closed in on him.

Biggles spoke, and his tone was peremptory. "We're security police. Who are you?" Silence.

"What's your name?" snapped Biggles.

"Lowenski," came a nervous voice, tinged with a slight accent.

"Nationality?"

"British."

"Since when?"

"A year ago."

"And before that?"

"Polish."

"Did you come to this country as a soldier or as a displaced person?"

"I came in the War and flew with the R.A.F."

"Where do you live now?"

"Perth. I was stationed in Scotland. I've got a shop there. What's the matter? I can come here if I like. This isn't private ground."

Biggles ignored the question. "Did you know the man who was flying this machine?"

The man remained motionless. They all closed in on him.

A brief pause. "I think so."

"A friend of yours?"

"I hope I'm wrong, but if I'm right—yes."

"Another Pole?"

"Yes."

When Biggles went on his tone was less harsh. "Now listen carefully, Lowenski. We know what you're doing here, so we needn't waste time arguing about that. What you came for isn't here. Just how far you are implicated, I don't know. I shall find out, so on what you say much will depend. Now then, answer my questions and you'll find that we're not unreasonable. Try being awkward and we'll be awkward too."

"You can't do anything to me," came back Lowenski. But the confident tone in which the words were said didn't ring true.

"You are still on probation," said Biggles curtly. "I could have you sent back to Poland. How would that suit you?"

The hesitation that followed told Ginger that the shot had gone home. "You—you wouldn't do that," almost pleaded Lowenski. "What about my wife?"

"What about her?"

"I married a Scottish girl."

"Then she looks like being out of luck unless you come clean. Now, what about it?"

"All right. What do you want to know?" asked Lowenski desperately.

"Are you in this business on your own account or are you working for somebody?" demanded Biggles.

"Own account? Not likely! Where would I get the money to finance a game of this size?"

"But you're in it for money."

"That's where you're wrong. I can earn my living without scrambling up and down mountains all night. It happens I've got a father and mother in Poland. They've been interned on a trumped-up political charge. If I don't do what I'm told, they've had it."

"Oh! So that's it," murmured Biggles. "The Government bosses who are running your country have got the screws on you, eh?"

"That's the truth."

"Have they made you do this sort of thing before?"

"No."

"Where did this machine start from?"

"America, I think."

"Where was it going?"

"Warsaw, I believe."

"Why are you in doubt about it?"

"I can only tell you what I think," protested Lowenski. "I'm not supposed to know anything about it. But it happens

that a Polish friend of mine, another old War pilot, is in the same fix as I am, only in his case it's his wife they've got in Poland. The other day I had a letter from him to say he was being sent to America to fetch a machine and fly it to Warsaw. They'd chosen him, they said, because he had been a night bomber, and he knows his way across Europe in the dark. He was hoping to see his wife when he got over. How he came to be so far off his track I don't know, but when I heard about this mysterious crash I put two and two together. We did our raids from an aerodrome not far from here. Maybe Stefan, if it was him, came this way to pick up the old bearings."

"And how were you brought into this?"

"This afternoon I had a phone call from London ordering me to go to the crash and collect some bars of heavy metal I'd find in it. I reckon I was chosen because Perth is not a great distance away. I could get here quicker than anyone coming from London."

"Who phoned you?"

"I don't know. I've never seen the man or heard his name; but I'd been warned by him to obey orders—or else——"

"How did you get here?"

"I've got a car."

"And having got the metal, what were you to do with it? Speak up! This is your chance to get your own back on these twisters."

Lowenski seemed to take a new interest. "Yes, that's right enough. My orders were to take the stuff to the big marsh near Nethy. At four o'clock, just before daybreak, a plane would land and collect it. All I had to do was hand the stuff over and then send a telegram first thing in the morning to a box number at the General Post Office, London, saying that the job had been done."

"I'll have that box number from you," said Biggles. "Meantime, I'm going to keep the appointment with that plane. I shall have to borrow your car. You can come with us and go home afterwards, or you can make your own way

An automatic spat twice, one of the shots whistling

home, leaving me your address, because I shall have to get in touch with you later."

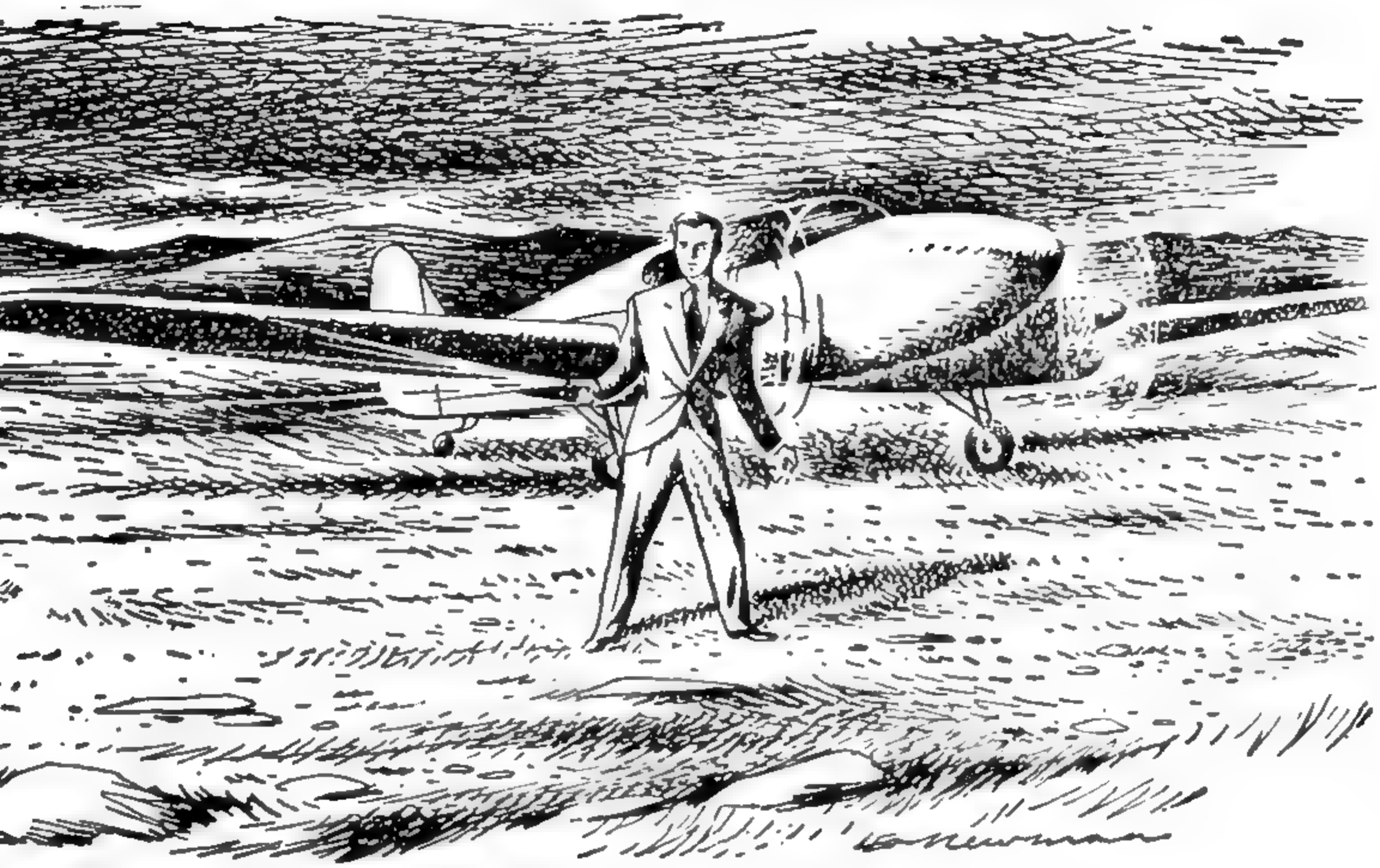
"I'll come with you," decided Lowenski.

At five minutes to four, having left the car on the road, Biggles led his party into the big desolate marsh, now dried by the summer sun, that was Lowenski's rendezvous with the foreign agent.

As Biggles admitted to Ginger, it was an ideal place for a sinister assignation. On one side the land lay flat and deserted to Strathspey, a haunt for wildfowl. To the south rose the mountains. To the north, the rising ground that fringed the marsh was occupied by a forest of Scots pines. So much could be discerned in the waning light of a dying moon.

Going on to the shadows of the trees, they sat down to wait.

As a matter of detail the aircraft was a little overdue; and



unpleasantly close to Ginger's head. Biggles fired back.

they were unaware of its presence until it suddenly came gliding low over them—the result, as Ginger realized, of the pilot coming over very high with his power cut off. A black, twin-engined, low-wing monoplane landed almost without a sound. It came to a standstill about a hundred yards away.

Biggles was already running towards it, followed by the others, when a man jumped down and looked about him. For a moment or two he did not see Biggles's party, but when he did, apparently scenting danger, he moved fast. Thereafter things happened in less time than they take to tell.

The man shouted something in a foreign language, obviously a warning to somebody in the machine—the first indication that he was not alone. And had he concentrated his efforts entirely on getting back into the plane he might have got away with it. Instead, quite unnecessarily, on the way he turned; his hand went to a pocket and an automatic

spat twice, one of the shots whistling unpleasantly close to Ginger's head. Biggles fired back, missed the man but hit the machine. The man made a dash for safety, but in his haste forgot to look where he was going. Biggles, perceiving what was likely to happen, shouted a warning; but it was too late. The man ran too close to one of the low-set air-screws. There was a vicious smack and a shower of splinters as one of the whirling blades struck his skull. He went down as if he had been shot through the heart.

By this time, the man in the aircraft—the pilot, it is to be supposed—had, of course, realized that he was in a trap. He may have seen his partner fall, apparently to Biggles's shot, which would account for, and perhaps justify, the course he took. But the fact that he was prepared to abandon his companion in order to save himself was made clear when the engines roared, as the first move in taking off. What he could not have realized was that one air-screw was shattered. The result may be imagined.

Biggles and his party flung themselves clear as the aircraft charged past them and raced on with swiftly increasing speed; but being unbalanced it immediately started a wild swerve. A cry of horror broke from Ginger's lips as the machine, out of control, rushed headlong at the pine-wood.

Whether the pilot lost his head, or whether he still hoped to get airborne, will never be known. At the last moment the machine did manage to get off the ground, but there was never the slightest chance of its clearing the trees. At the last moment the pilot must have known this, for the engines died abruptly, as if the ignition had been cut to minimize the risk of fire when the inevitable crash occurred. There came the horrible, tearing, splintering noise of a crashing aircraft. It was followed by a silence just as awful. The only sound was the drip of petrol escaping from a fractured tank.

Biggles rapped out an order to Bertie to attend to the man who had collided with the air-screw, and then raced to the crash. Ginger went with him, and at the sight that met his eyes something inside him seemed to go cold. A couple of

minutes answered their unspoken question. The pilot was dead. They could only leave him lying beside the wrecked machine while they went back to Bertie.

"He's had it," reported Bertie briefly. "The blade took the top of his head off, poor devil."

"All right," said Biggles, in an expressionless voice. "We'll get to the phone and put a police guard over this mess until I've had a word with the Chief."

Little remains to be told. At the subsequent inquiry, held behind locked doors, it was revealed that the plane that had crashed on the mountain, a new secret prototype, and its cargo had been stolen in America. The pilot, presumably in the hope of escaping pursuit, had made a wide sweep to the north before heading for a European destination. What this was to have been was suggested by the type of machine that had crashed in the trees, and the nationality of its occupants.

Perhaps the most important outcome of the affair was what followed the arrival, at the London Post Office, of the foreign agent who had given Lowenski orders to recover the uranium. A telegram was waiting for him, ostensibly from Lowenski, but, in fact, one that had been planted by the police. The man collected it and was afterwards followed to what turned out to be the London headquarters of a nest of international spies. A police raid on the building yielded information that had been sought for a long time.

For security reasons, not a word of this story appeared in the newspapers, so it is unlikely that those who sent the machine to fetch the uranium ever knew what became of it and its crew. To save Lowenski from possible reprisals, he was officially sent to prison. Unofficially, he was compensated for the loss of his business and given facilities to emigrate to a British colony, where, some time later, his parents, whose release had been secured by political negotiation, joined him. So, on the whole, he came out of the business better than he could have hoped. As far as Biggles was concerned, it was just another job of work buttoned up.

Dirk went overboard into a rising wave.

[See page 209

ARTHUR CATHERALL

★

The 'prentice deckie

UNMINDFUL of the thin rain which was falling, Dirk Staton had remained on deck staring at the twin red lights which marked the lock gates. He had been praying they would change to green. If they changed in time, Dirk felt there was a chance that he might go to sea in some other capacity than that of apprentice deckhand.

Suddenly the lights winked, and instead of two red eyes staring through the darkness there were two bright green spots of colour. The tide was at flood, the lock gates would be opened in a minute or so, and the way would be clear for the waiting trawlers to put to sea.

Dirk moved quietly from near the cook's galley along to where Collier Hall, the skipper of the steam trawler *Dunkirk Pride*, was standing talking to the ship's husband.

"Well, what are you going to do, Collier?" the ship's husband asked, preparing to vault over the rail on to the dock side. "You are two men short. The ship's runner may bring one substitute, but I'm pretty certain he won't get two men."

Collier Hall swore, and his language would have blistered paint. Trawlers never carry more men than is necessary, and to put to sea with a shortage of deckhands would slow down the work once they reached the Icelandic fishing grounds.

This was the moment Dirk had been waiting for. He

"I'm Staton, the apprentice deckhand."

stepped forward and respectfully addressed the captain.

"Excuse me, sir," he said confidently, "I'm Staton, the apprentice deckhand. I know we are two men short, and I thought you might like to know that—er—I passed out at the trawling school with higher marks than any other pupil has ever earned."

"Oh—well, what of it?" Collier Hall's manner was brusque, and not at all what Dirk had expected. Dirk had spent some months learning all there was to know about the job of a deckhand on trawlers. He could mend nets, he could work a winch, he could handle the trawl lifting tackle, and he had rather expected that Collier Hall would see in him the saviour of the day.

"Well—I——" Dirk lost some of his confidence. "I thought as there were two men short in the deck crew you might like to know that—well, that I could fill one vacancy, at least."

As he spoke a very broad-shouldered man had approached. Dirk was to know him later as 'Beefy' Potter, the mate, and he laughed at Dirk's words.

"There ye are, Coll," he roared, "ye've got a ready-made deckie—top o' the school. What're we worryin' about?"

Collier Hall was angry, otherwise he would not have been so curt with his new apprentice.

"You'll learn, my lad," he snapped, "that it takes more than book-learning to produce a good deckie. You do a few trips as a 'prentice, then we'll see what good your top of the class means."

To the ship's husband, who was chuckling as he slipped over the rail on to the dock side, Collier Hall said: "I'm going, whether I'm two men short or not. If the ship's runner brings a man, tell him to jump as we go through the lock gates. So long."

"So long, Coll."

Dirk had slunk back into the shadows, and he was glad of the darkness, for he knew his face was red. He was bitterly disappointed. At the trawling school they had assured him that he was the best pupil they had ever had. Everyone had praised him—yet he was just thrown into the category of 'another apprentice.'

He was staring moodily along the dock to where several other trawlers were getting ready to move out through the lock gates and into the river. Then the engine-room telegraph bell in the *Dunkirk Pride's* wheelhouse tinkled. There was a softer tinkle from the engine-room, and a moment or so later the decks began to quiver slightly as the engines woke to life.

"Cast off 'stern," came a yell from the wheelhouse, and when the bosun gave an answering yell the trawler began to swing gently away from the quayside. Her for'ard moorings were cast off, and the trawler joined the little queue of ships waiting their turn to pass through the lock into the river.

A man made a perilous jump on to the *Pride's* deck as the trawler nosed her way cautiously through the lock, and the

ship's runner hurled a bundle of gear after him. One vacancy had been filled at least.

Dirk was just forgetting some of his humiliation when his pride received another blow. Out in the river he had begun to check off the buoys to himself, and got some satisfaction from the thought that he knew the position of every buoy from the lock gates to Spurn Point.

That first flashing red light on the starboard side would be the Upper West Middle; a boat-shaped buoy painted red, with a bell and a flashing red light. That was followed by the Lower West Middle, which was an——

"Where's that top o' the class 'prentice deckie?" The bull roar from the wheelhouse came from Beefy Potter, the mate, and when Dirk scampered along to see what was wanted Beefy pointed to the bows: "Get up on the whaleback—and let's see what yer schoolin' has done for ye. Keep your eyes skinned, and shout back if ye see anything in our way."

As he slammed the wheelhouse door again, Beefy chuckled, and to Collier Hall, the skipper, he said: "You've got to knock the bounce out of these school-trained deckies right from the start—and I'm the lad to do it."

For Dirk it was the beginning of ten days he would never forget.

Dirk's father was a trawlerman, and he had never painted rosy pictures of the life. Dirk lost some of his romantic outlook before he was taken off the whaleback that first morning. The thin rain seemed to increase as the trawler drew nearer the sea. It was chilly, and Dirk began to have an uncomfortable feeling in his stomach.

When he went off duty it was breakfast-time. He was chilled to the bone, but the warm, thick air of the aft cabin, where the cook was putting out plates with bacon and fried bread, made Dirk wrinkle his nose in disgust.

The engineer and stoker had just come off duty, and they were eating with gusto.

"Make the most o' this mornin', lad," the first engineer said. "When we get settled down you'll have your grub

"Where are you going? Aren't you hungry?"

among a pack of wolves—the deckies just swallow everythin' on the table. We don't have a tablecloth—'cause they'd eat that as well, if they—where are you going? Aren't you hungry?"

Dirk did not stay to answer the query. He had lifted one piece of fried bread, had taken a morsel—and then he knew he was going to be sick.

About two o'clock in the afternoon he was roused from his bunk in the fo'c'sle. The mate wanted him.

"You can handle rope, can't you?" he demanded, a twinkle in his eyes. "Yer certificate says you're first-class at net mendin', splicin', rope and wire."

Dirk nodded miserably. The trawler was rolling and bucking in a choppy cross sea. She shipped water first amidships port, then amidships starboard, and there was a constant wash of water on deck.

"Get yer fearnoughts on," Beefy ordered. "I've got a rope job for you."

Dirk went below and got into his 'fearnoughts'; these were heavy trousers of felt-like material. They kept the deckhand warm, and would resist water for a long time. Dirk felt a little better when he had donned these and his seaboots. Some of the deckhands resting in their bunks made joking remarks about their newness, and Dirk was glad to get out into the salty air.

Beefy was waiting. He had several huge balls of thick twine, the stuff from which trawl meshes are made. There was also a two-gallon drum nearby.

"Being as you are well schooled in all these things, my lad," Beefy chuckled, "you'll know as this here twine isn't a bit o' good till it's been well soaked in pitch. You needn't be feared o' using it all. We've plenty more aboard."

He was chuckling as he walked away, and Dirk opened the two-gallon drum to begin the horrible task of soaking the twine.

Whenever he was free he went to his bunk. He was ill, and felt like dying. The thought of food made his stomach revolt. When the trawler struggled through the stormy waters of the Pentland Firth, Dirk did not go on deck to look at John o' Groats, though one of the deckhands came down specially to tell him the house was visible.

By the time the *Pride* reached the Icelandic grounds Dirk was praying for the time when they would return to the Humber. The only place where he could find any comfort at all was in his bunk. The deckhands did their best for him, and even Beefy gave him a word of friendly advice.

"Look, my lad," Beefy said when they were nearing the coast of Iceland and the snow-tipped peak of Oaefa Jokull was plainly to be seen, "you'll have to shape. Most of the

'prentices I've had aboard have been sick—but they've worked just the same. Work an' eat—that's the way to tackle it. Unless you can show a leg a bit oftener, I'm afraid this'll be your first and your last trip wi' us."

Dirk did try. When the trawl was shot off the east coast of Iceland, Collier Hall had chosen the spot well. Fish, prime cod, some of them a yard long, came up so thick and fast that the deck was never cleared. Dirk was told to put on his gutting gloves, hone his knife, and come into the gutting pounds, a space on the for'ard deck where the fish were gutted, washed and counted before being put on ice in the hold. Dirk was shown how to gut.

"And bear in mind," Beefy warned, "you don't just gut the fish. Take out the liver, and put it in one of the baskets. We reckon to make a nice bit of pocket money from cod livers. And in any case—the kids at home need the cod-liver oil."

Dirk knew all about gutting codfish. He had learned at the school, but it was not quite the same on the heaving deck of the *Dunkirk Pride*. The deck was slippery, the codfish were big and fought for their lives, and all the while Dirk felt like dying. He fell twice, and was covered with slime off the new-caught fish.

Despite his thick 'fearnought' pants, his woollen socks and seaboot stockings, and his thick rubber seaboots, Dirk's feet gradually became almost numb with cold. The fact that he had eaten practically nothing at all since the trip began made matters worse.

He fought hard to keep going. He wanted to prove to Beefy and the grim-faced Collier Hall in the wheelhouse that he could back up all his school knowledge with the strength and guts necessary in every deckie. The odds were against him. When the third successive batch of cod was dropped on to the deck Dirk just collapsed.

He was taken aft and put in a spare bunk in the cabin where the engineers' mate and bosun slept. It was handier for the old cook to keep an eye on him there. And Beefy

He fought hard to keep going.

Potter shook his head when he went into the wheelhouse to relieve his skipper for an hour.

"The kid's got guts, Coll," Beefy affirmed, "but he's just one o' them misfits—seasick every time he smells salt. Just no use to us at all."

Collier Hall nodded.

"Pity. I like his father. He's in the *David and Jonathan*, isn't he?"

Beefy nodded.

"Yes. It'll break his heart. He's expectin' his kid to come out as skipper in no time at all."

Down in the aft cabin, Dirk was being coaxed to take a cup of beef-tea by a sympathetic cook, while up in the nor'-east a wind was blowing off the polar ice which was to cause a man in a B.B.C. studio in London to say among other things: "Gales will be particularly severe in the Iceland-Faroes region."

Fishing stopped when the first effect of the gale was felt. Gear was stowed and everything made shipshape. The *Dunkirk Pride* began riding out the storm, while her tired deckhands retired to their bunks to snatch some much-needed rest.

Then, almost as casually as an invitation to dinner, came a message by wireless telephony to Collier Hall in the wheelhouse of the *Dunkirk Pride*. Nat Greenbank in the wheelhouse of the steam trawler *David and Jonathan* asked: "That you, Coll? Nat Greenbank here. I've shed my propeller. Are you near enough to give me a tow? I'm being blown inshore south of Langanes."

Collier Hall swore bitterly before pushing up the switch which enabled him to talk back to Greenbank aboard the *David and Jonathan*. "I'll do what I can, Nat, but I'm about eight hours' steaming away. Look for me about five o'clock. I'll fire a triple rocket."

It was nine o'clock in the morning then. Throughout the bitter day the *Dunkirk Pride* smashed through the high seas which thundered down on her well deck and foamed madly to the stern. Water spouted from her scuppers, and it was almost suicide to try to walk the decks.

Down below Dirk slept fitfully. He was feeling much stronger, for the cook had fed him wisely and often on soups. He knew nothing of the drama which was approaching, and it was only when the bosun and Beefy came into the aft cabin about six o'clock, wet and weary, that he was given an inkling of what was taking place up above.

The two trawlermen thought Dirk was sleeping and as they gulped down their scalding hot tea Beefy grunted bitterly: "That'll be another write-off of every man jack. We haven't a rocket left—and if the *David* lasts until morning you can call me the Cannibal King."

"And the storm's blowing out now," the bosun wailed, "the wind's dropping."

"The sea isn't dropping," Beefy snarled, "and there isn't a cat in hell's chance of getting a boat across. Fancy . . .

old Nat Greenbank . . . there's a hundred fathoms between us and them and we daren't go nearer. Oh, it's damnable."

Dirk sat up.

"Did you say Nat Greenbank?" he asked, and his heart was hammering against his ribs. "What's the matter? Is the *David and Jonathan* in trouble?"

"Trouble?" Beefy's voice was bitter. "Not anythin' you'd understand. The *David* is ashore, that's all. An' being pounded to bits. Oh——" he swore, as men will swear when comrades are in terrible danger and nothing can be done for them.

Dirk scrambled out of the bunk. He pulled on his sea-boots, his thick jersey. He grabbed for the oilskins which were rolled in a bundle under the table.

When he got on deck something like nausea stopped him. It was not physical sickness, but the sickness which comes from fear. He had never been in such a howling wildness. The *Dunkirk Pride* was staggering under the pounding of mountainous waves, and her decks were a flood of foaming water.

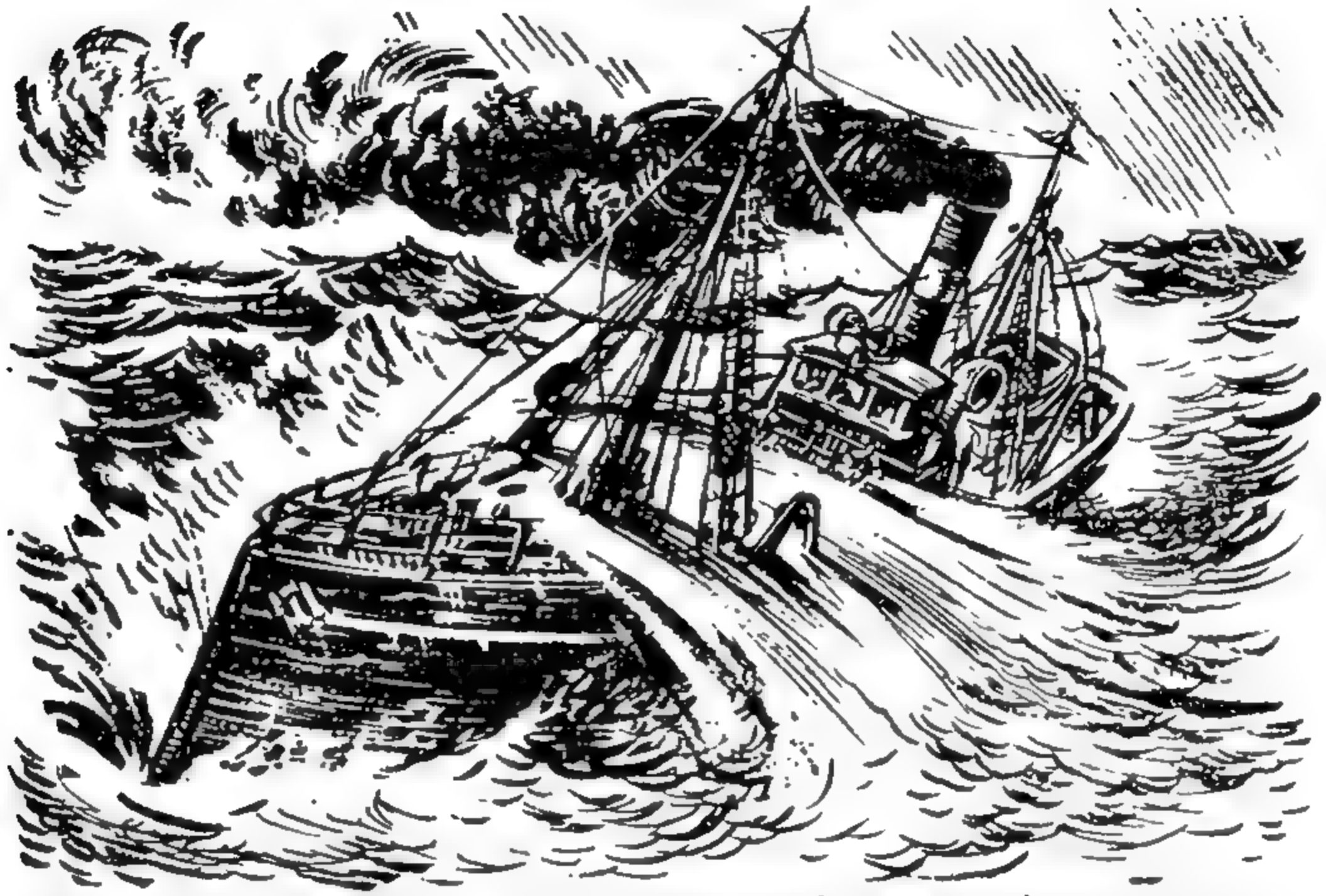
The thing which helped him in that moment was a thin pencil of light, the searchlight on top of their own wheel-house, which was swinging to keep focused on another ship held helpless under the lee of towering cliffs.

Dirk somehow fought his way to the wheelhouse. His seasickness was forgotten. That ship across there, if the mate and the bosun had told the truth, was his father's trawler, the *David and Jonathan*.

On the foredeck of the *Pride* a group of deckhands were trying hard to construct a small raft in the maelstrom of waters which continually poured over the whaleback.

They were trying to float a line down to the doomed trawler.

Collier Hall, skipper of the *Pride*, had no equal when it came to handling a ship in a tight corner. He took chances in the hour which followed, going as near the *David and Jonathan* as he dared, in order to try to get that flimsy line



The Dunkirk Pride *was staggering under mountainous waves.*

to them. Every effort failed. There seemed to be a current which sheered the raft away every time.

After the third attempt Dirk went into the wheelhouse. He found Collier Hall there, grim-faced, one hand on the brass-bound steering wheel, one hand resting on the engine-room telegraph lever.

"What do you want?" Collier Hall demanded. "Get out, and get in your bunk. This is no work for a lad."

"My father's on the *David*," Dirk yelled back, and now he was no longer afraid of his skipper.

"What if he is?" Hall snapped, "We're doing all we can—*you* can't do anything."

"I can, I can," Dirk insisted. "You'll never get that line floated down to them. Three times you've tried, and——"

"Three times," Collier Hall laughed sarcastically. "Seven times—and I'll go on doing it till I get a line to them. Now, get out."

Dirk shook his head defiantly.

"Listen, sir," he said, "I'm a swimmer, and——"

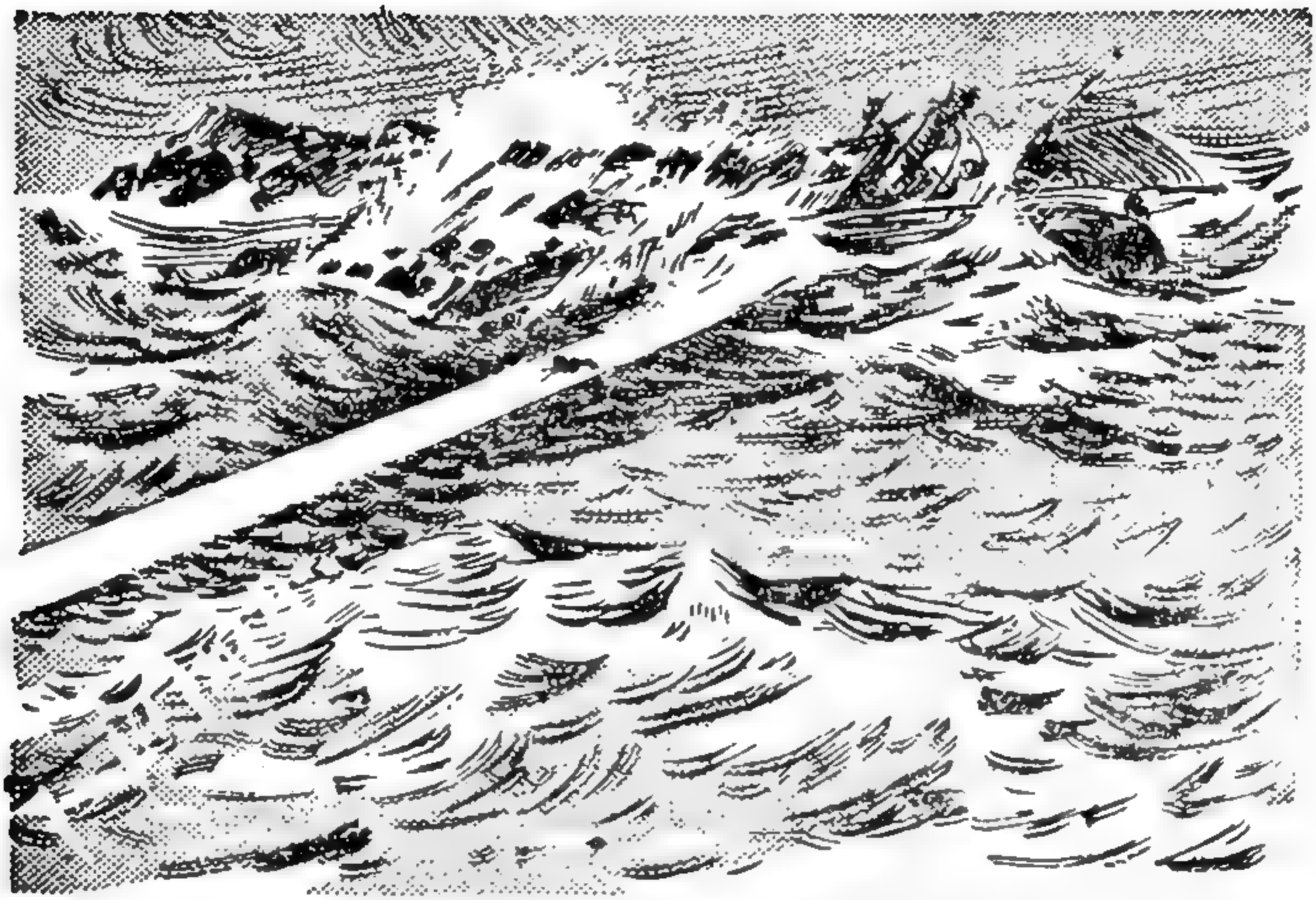
"It'd need a very powerful swimmer, and then he wouldn't do it," was the instant retort.

"I *can* do it," Dirk contradicted. "You've floated that little raft to within twenty feet of them. You can float me down—and I'll swim that twenty feet."

"You might be smashed to death on the rocks," the grim-faced skipper replied, and he shook his head. "No, lad, you've got guts, and I didn't think you had, but it's no use."

"You've got to let me do it!" For the first time since coming aboard the *Dunkirk Pride* Dirk was fighting back, and refusing to accept defeat. "I have the right to try—if it's only because my father is aboard the *David*. I've got a certificate . . ." Dirk paused then, and even he had to allow himself a queer little smile as he added: "Yes, another certificate besides the one that says that a year ago I was the best swimmer in the eastern counties. That's why I say

A pencil of light from the Dunkirk Pride's *spotlight played over the water. Men peered anxiously into the night.*



It took three and a half hours to complete the rescue, and it was touch and go with the last two men.

you've got to let me try it. I can do it, sir—I *know* I can."

"God forgive me if I'm making a mistake," Collier Hall muttered, and he nodded: "All right, get ready."

A nine-inch-wide harness of triple-folded blankets was made, and to it was secured a light manilla line. Dirk was stripped and covered with lubricating oil to keep out the biting chill of the water. He was fitted with a Board of Trade life-jacket, and then Collier Hall manoeuvred the trawler into position.

Dirk went overboard into a rising wave, and the deck-hands standing thigh deep in water held their breath as the spotlight from the front of the wheelhouse sought for the head of the 'prentice deckie.

One moment Dirk would be tossed skywards on a wave, the next sucked down into a deep trough. As he drew nearer

the stranded trawler the waves became shorter and more broken. He conserved his strength for the vital struggle; a few yards only would separate him from the bows of the stranded ship, and it was there that a perverse current would try to carry him out of reach.

The pencil of light from the *Dunkirk Pride's* spotlight played over the broken water, and over the stern of the *David and Jonathan*. Men peered anxiously into the night. They saw the boy lifted on a wave. They saw eager hands outstretched from the wave-buffeted stern of the *David*, but not until the manilla line tightened, not once, uncertainly, but three times in the agreed signal, could they be certain that the chance in a thousand had come off, the impossible had been turned into the possible, and a line actually got across to the stricken trawler.

It took three and a half hours to complete the rescue, and it was touch and go with the last two men. The *David and Jonathan* had broken her back and was fast disintegrating. Nevertheless, not a life was lost.

Dirk's moment of glory was at noon next day. He woke about half-past eleven. A choppy sea was still running and the *Dunkirk Pride* was pitching and rolling. Dirk got out of his bunk and dressed. He went on deck, to find that preparations were already under way for a resumption of fishing. His father was seated on the port winch, smoking a cigarette, and apparently none the worse for the night's experience.

Dirk walked across the deck. He looked at his father, but did not speak. He walked down to the galley, and slid down the six perpendicular steps which led to the dining-room below. There was a smell of cooking, mixed with the hot, rather oily smell inseparable from the stern cabin of a trawler. Dirk called the cook.

"Have you got any bacon, Cooky?" he asked.

"I'd find some if I had none," the old cook announced illogically. "Yer a hero, lad, and nobody'll deny it."

"I want some bacon," Dirk replied, "and fried bread."

"Two shakes of a dog's tail and you'll have it," was the reply.

The bacon and the fried bread were brought down, together with a pot of real trawlerman's tea, strong, with plenty of milk and too much sugar in it. Just the kind of 'brew' to upset any but a very strong stomach.

Dirk drank. He took a bite of the fried bread, and popped a piece of bacon into his mouth. There was a fair amount of fat on the bacon. The cook watched him, smiling. But the smile vanished a few minutes later when Dirk jumped to his feet, flung his arms round the cook's neck and yelled: "It's true! I knew it was true, I knew it was."

Before the astonished cook could find his tongue Dirk had run on deck. He met his father, who was coming to see why his son had hurried past without speaking.

"Dad, the most wonderful thing has happened."

"Dirk, there'll never be anything more wonderful than you were last night," his father assured him, and gripped him in his powerful arms. "Laddie, you were magnificent."

"But Dad," Dirk drew himself away, "that's not it at all—I'm cured! I'm cured!"

"Cured?" By now a number of the men who owed their lives to Dirk had gathered around. "Cured of what?" several of them asked.

"Seasickness!" Dirk was so filled with the wonder of it that he could not understand why they should not know how sick he had been. "I was seasick all the way up—I wanted to die. And now I've just had strong tea, bacon and fried bread—and I'm all right."

Collier Hall had come along, and he nodded, and smiled.

"Dirk, we'll make a trawlerman of you yet. And now, if you are feeling fit, there's work to be done, getting the trawl ready."

No 'prentice deckie ever went more willingly to the task of getting gear ready for 'shooting' than did Dirk. He felt like a condemned prisoner who had received an unexpected reprieve.

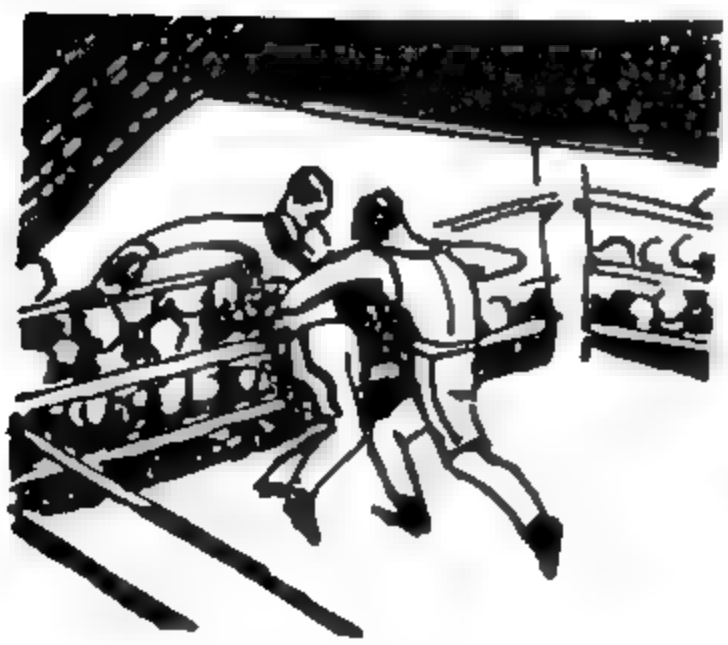
Rumbling in his throat with rage, Bert swung round at Tony again, and this time his boots went into action as well as his fists.

[See page 215

ERIC LEYLAND

★

Seconds out of the ring



IT was a small, brown dog, cringing against the yellow brick wall, long since encrusted with the dirt which for fifty years had enfolded the lower part of Manston Green. The man was perhaps twenty-five, a hefty brute weighing something like thirteen stone, so Tony Beresford's experienced eye judged, with a bovine face devoid of any expression; his feet encased in hob-nailed boots. It was one of these boots which was now engaged in kicking the small, whimpering dog which, pinned against the wall and a jutting buttress, could not escape.

"Cor, bark at me, would yer," muttered the tough, each word punctuated by a kick.

Tony, coming lightly up the narrow street which formed a short cut to the railway station, quickened his step. A girl of about seven or eight was standing a little distance away, crying.

"Don't do that, mister—'e's mine—don't do that!"

Tony realized, with that fraction of his mind not occupied with the frightened dog, that the small girl was the daughter of old Smart, who had risen from the gutter to own a dozen shops in the town and was a client of the firm of Spottiswoode & Spottiswoode, Solicitors, to whom Tony was articled. Not that it mattered who she was. Tony Beresford, though slow to anger, as a boxer should be, was interested only in the man and the dog.

The tough did not hear him coming. His first knowledge of his presence was when Tony put out his hand and grasped his shoulder, swinging him round.

"That'll be enough of that."

The man stared at him, flabbergasted. He saw a youngster of a fraction over eighteen, of medium height—a couple of inches under six feet—weighing just over eleven stone. A youngster with a crop of light brown hair, blue eyes and a pleasantly ugly face. He saw nothing else, though the grip on his shoulder, which had swung him round so easily, should have warned him that the boy had not only a natural strength but knew how to apply it.

All this was beyond Bert Patterson, however. All he saw was a boy, seven years younger than himself, weighing about two stone less—a young cub who had the audacity and the idiocy to interfere with Bert Patterson.

"Leave the dog alone," snapped Tony.

Bert was a man of few words, and those for the most part obscene. Now he produced one of those expressions and simultaneously hit out, forgetting the dog, which scurried away and, with the child, ran up the street glad to escape.

Had Bert's blow landed the issue would have been beyond doubt. The man was not a boxer, yet he had a piston punch which could have felled an ox. But Tony, from habit, had been watching the man's eyes and glimpsed what was coming. Without apparent effort he swayed a couple of inches to the right, with the result that Bert's fist passed over his left shoulder, and the man himself, stumbling forward, lurched against Tony. The latter had his back to the brick buttress and could not avoid him, but instead of using the opening thus presented, he merely pushed him away and moved out into the open.

"That's enough," he said, "we don't want trouble."

Tony Beresford, the Manston Green A.B.C. middle-weight, was never anxious for a fight. It was one thing to shape up to a man in the ring, another to brawl in the street.

He was given no choice on this occasion, however.

The dog . . . with the child, scurried away . . . glad to escape.

Rumbling in his throat with rage, Bert swung round at Tony again, and this time his boots went into action as well as his fists.

The savage right which Bert launched Tony countered easily enough, but the kick caught him unprepared. The hobnailed boot met his shin and Tony gasped, sick with pain; as he stumbled back, Bert's left flashed out.

"That'll teach yer!"

How Tony managed to avoid the full force of that left he did not know. It was sheer instinct, of course, the result of years in the ring—and the result of George's tuition as much as Sergeant Carter's, the boxing instructor at Cranston School, and Pete Taylor's, trainer to the Manston Green Amateur Boxing Club. George was a born coach, though he couldn't win his own fights.

Now Tony's body reacted automatically. As he stumbled he twisted to the right. The blow was not avoided, but it

was minimized. It caught Tony on the side of the head, not under the jaw, as Bert had intended.

The boy fell, but he was fit and tough—trained to a hair, ready for the match with the neighbouring Beckley club, due to be fought on the next evening. Bert's left might have put paid to one less experienced and less fit; it momentarily stunned Tony, but he was not within miles of being knocked out.

Thinking he had finished him, Bert came in for the kill. He shambled forward, muttering, heavy boot raised. Tony, however, had been given just sufficient time to recover. His shin hurt abominably where Bert's boot had struck, but his head was clearing and his mind was working. He rolled to one side and was up on his feet so swiftly that the tough was taken by surprise. Tony had hitherto fought all his fights according to the rules—but this must be an exception. The street was deserted, and though there might well be spectators watching from the windows of the dirty little houses, they knew better than to interfere with Bert Patterson. No help could be expected from outside.

As he came to his feet Tony ducked, gripped Bert's leg below and above the knee and jerked. No man living can withstand such a method of attack. Bert fell back, dropping to the road like a sack. He was up again almost instantly, but by then Tony was out in the middle of the road, his hands up, on his toes.

In came Bert, fists swinging wildly—and Tony knew a great and unholy joy. He had this man's measure now. Too often had he fought in the ring not to be able to sum up an opponent. Bert was tough and strong, but he had no science and now he had lost control of what temper he had ever possessed, which meant that he was throwing away his advantages of weight and size. Tony knew that barring accidents this was going to be a piece of cake. It jolly well had to be, for he couldn't afford accidents. He was on his way to the station to meet a girl he'd never seen in his life, and you don't want to do that with a lovely black eye and a

collarless shirt. Still, according to George, this cousin of his, who was coming to visit his parents, was a sport, even knew a lot about boxing, so said George!

Bert was on him. A vicious right was evaded by a smooth movement of the head timed to a fraction; the left jab which followed, aimed for the stomach, was countered. And then—and then there was Bert wide open. Tony moved in with the

It happened just like that.

precision of a machine. Not the face, not that great ugly jaw which looked as though it had been hewn out of granite; no, the point, where the strongest man is weak. Though, of course, after the right to the stomach maybe a left upper-cut——

It happened just like that. A feint brought Bert's right up, uncovering the point. Then Tony's own right, travelling not more than eight inches, but with everything he had packed into it, came through. Bert's hands dropped, for a second he stood there with agony on his ugly face, and then Tony put in that left upper-cut, a sweet blow flush under the jaw.

That was enough and more than enough for Bert Patterson.

He fell like a sack of lead, and as he fell his head hit the rough kerbing stone. Before Tony's horrified eyes a red stain began to spread across the granite.

He wheeled round as footsteps came running up the road. Two men, one bulky, the other a wizened little rat of a fellow, were racing towards the scene.

"I see yer do it!" cried the big man. "Been an' done old Bert in, I reckon. Cor, 'e's bleedin' like a pig!"

Tony simply stood there, face white, his mind in a turmoil. Ever since he could remember, or at all events ever since he had taken up boxing, he had been afraid of hurting an opponent. Once, years before, he had seen a film where a boxer had been killed in the ring, and Tony had never forgotten it. Sergeant Carter, at Cranston, had had quite a job with Tony, persuading him that such an event could only happen once in a million times and that even then it would be because the other fellow had not been properly examined

The wizened little fellow, bending over Bert, looked up. "Cor—'e's dead," he muttered . . . Tony turned and ran.

by the doctor. Tony had listened and agreed—but even now there were certain people at the club (particularly Tom Stacey, who if it had not been for Tony would represent Manston Green in the middle-weight class) who said that he pulled his punches. Now, standing there looking down at the unconscious Bert, whose blood was staining the curb, he was conscious of one dreadful realization. He had killed a man—it had happened at last—he had killed a man!

The wizened little fellow, bending over Bert, looked up. His voice was a whine, and there was fear in it, too.

"Cor—'e's dead," he muttered. "'Ere, this is a job for the cops!"

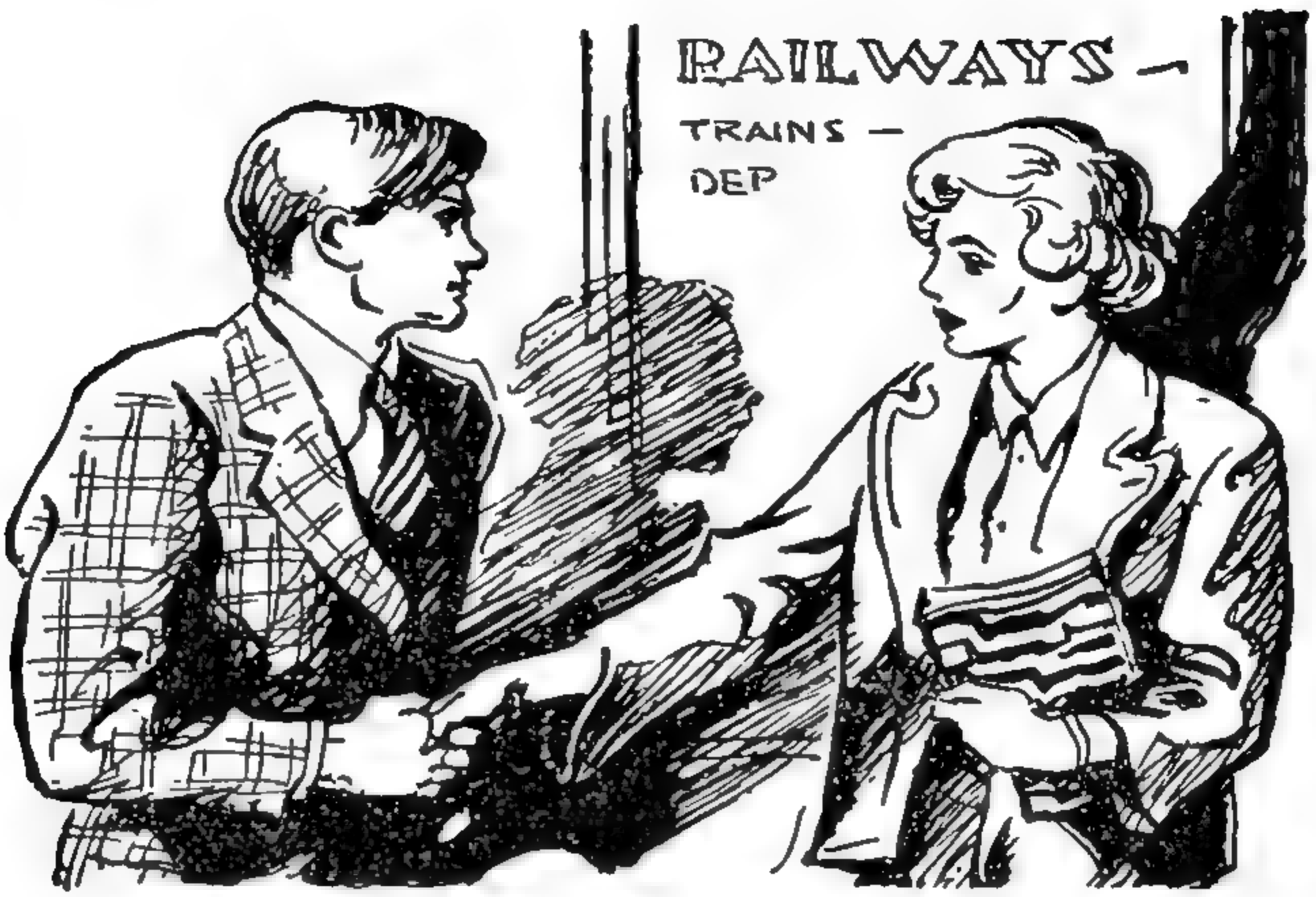
His words seeped into Tony's consciousness. Bert was dead, by accident, certainly. But the police would come, there would be an inquest, probably a charge of man-slaughter.

Hardly realizing what he was doing, he turned and ran. Behind him he heard the men shouting; he heard doors and windows slamming open. Then he was round the corner, across the street, round another corner, losing himself in a maze of small, mean streets, his heart pounding, the blood racing through his veins. He had killed a man—he had killed a man.

All thought of Mary Dacres, of the fact that he was supposed to meet her at the station, had fled from his mind; it was not until he found himself staring stupidly at the lighted clock over the main booking-hall that he realized that he had found his way to the station or remembered that George's cousin had to be escorted home.

As he stood on the edge of the pavement outside the station a clear voice smote his ears, and swinging round he saw a girl smiling at him.

"You're Tony Beresford, aren't you?" she inquired. "I'm Mary, George's cousin." And then: "You're awfully late; I was beginning to think you'd forgotten to come. George said he couldn't make it himself and would send you, but I thought—I say, are you all right? You're not ill, are you?"



"I'm Mary," she said. "You're awfully late."

Tony shook his head. His clothes showed few signs of the fight, and apart from the bruise on the side of his head, partially concealed by his hair, his face was unmarked. But he was white and shaken.

"No. No, I'm all right," he said. "Sorry I'm late."

He glanced behind him as he spoke, and watching him the tall, attractive girl of seventeen frowned. She was frankly disappointed in Tony, about whom she had heard so much from her cousin, George Dacres. She could see that he was indeed the young man about whom George had so often waxed eloquent—George was useless as a boxer, but what he did not know about the theory of the game was not worth knowing—and she had recognized him instantly. And yet though his appearance was so exactly as George had described, he was entirely different from her preconceived idea of him. He was obviously tough, and according to George he was a middle-weight of real promise; but Mary began to think that George had for once made a mistake.

This was no boxer; he was not alert enough, and he walked with a slouch. It was all very odd.

It was odd, too, perhaps, that this girl, who was as feminine as any girl could be, with her delicately moulded face framed by the really lovely copper-coloured hair, should know anything at all about boxing. Maybe she had inherited both her knowledge and her instinct for the sport, for her father had been a great amateur boxer and her grandfather had been largely responsible for stabilizing the amateur rules. At all events, Mary Dacres knew a great deal about the game. George had told Tony that he trusted her judgment of a boxer. And George had meant it.

But as he walked by Mary's side Tony's heart was cold, not now with panic terror but with a more calculated fear. Gone was the wild impulse to run, the blind instinct to leave the scene, coupled with which had been the subconscious belief that if only he could escape for the moment all would be well. Now he realized that his escape had been only temporary. The police would take charge—make inquiries, investigations. He realized, too, that he had been a fool to run away, because, if they caught him now, the fact that he had tried to escape would imply a guilty intention. He could imagine counsel for the prosecution emphasizing that because he had fled he must have intended injury to Bert. But he could not give himself up, for that would not undo the damage. Nothing could alter the fact that he had run away. No, he must trust to luck. Maybe the police would not be able to trace him.

With an effort he brought his attention back to the girl. He must try to seem normal to her, otherwise she would wonder what was the matter, and later, when she heard that a man had been killed, she might connect him with the event. There were the two men who had seen him. They would be able to provide the police with a description. And yet verbal descriptions were often misleading. Maybe there was still a chance. . . . Once again he had forgotten his companion.

"Look, if you don't want to listen to anything I've got to say, just tell me," she said suddenly. "I've been talking for some minutes and you haven't listened to a single word!"

"Oh, I'm sorry. To tell the truth, I—I *don't* feel very well."

She glanced at him, annoyed but curious. No, he didn't look well. And yet she had the distinct impression that there was more to it than that, something more than a bodily ill. The boy was continually glancing behind him, as though afraid of something.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly at last. "I was just saying that I hope you win your bout tomorrow night. Your club is matched against Beckley, isn't it? I'm looking forward to it."

Tony swung round and stared at her. They had by now come to George's house, a large though somewhat ugly residence standing on the top of the hill above the industrial part of the town, in about an acre of ground. There was a light in his window, indicating that he had returned from London, where he had been to take the first of his accountancy exams.

Of course, the club was fighting Beckley tomorrow! And Tony, as the Manston Green middle-weight, was matched against Knights, the Beckley star.

"No, I'm not fighting; I shan't be able to," he said abruptly.

"You won't be able to fight?" she cried. "But you're the white hope! George says you can beat Knights, but you're the only one who can!"

"I'm not fighting tomorrow," replied Tony in a flat voice. And then: "You don't understand. I'm not well."

Mary Dacres said no more. She was conscious that she had stumbled into something queer here at Manston Green. This boy's manner was strange, tense, as though—yes, as though he were properly scared. Being that sort of person, Mary remained silent.

Fifteen minutes later, in George's den on the first floor of

the Croft, however, she talked. George himself was there, tall, thin, clever; and there were two other people, Pete Taylor, the Manston Green A.B.C. trainer, a thickset, dour man whose craggy face could, however, be strangely lighted when he smiled, and Tom Stacey, the club's second string as middle-weight. Stacey was taller than Tony and a pound or so lighter; he was also twice as debonair and charming—at first sight. He was, however, one of those people whose charm tends to diminish as you get to know them better. But he had a certain following amongst the club's members.

Now, in George's comfortable den, the three of them were staring at Mary. Tony had brought her to the house, seen her safely inside and had then taken his abrupt leave, after scribbling a note which he had asked Mary to give to George. That note had now been read, Pete and Stacey having come round to discuss with George certain arrangements for the Beckley match on the morrow.

"Well, he says here he can't box tomorrow," muttered Pete helplessly. "No reason given. You say he's not well, Miss Dacres? But if so, why didn't he say so? I don't get it."

"Neither do I," replied the girl. "I'm not saying he's ill, that's just what he told me. I don't think he *is* ill, but something is the matter."

Stacey lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair, examining with apparent enthusiasm the immaculate crease in his black striped trousers.

"Of course, it's not *like* Tony," he said judicially, "but Knights is a bit of a terror, you know. Perhaps Tony doesn't feel up to it. And—well, it's awkward for me to say this, seeing that I'm the second string, but he does tend to pull his punches, you know. And where does that lead you, in the end? Why, you get scared and lose your nerve."

"That's enough out of you," snapped George, getting up. "For a long time now you've been doing your best to give the impression that Tony is a funk. Now you've come out into the open and pretty well said it. That lets me in. Tony has got approximately twice the guts you have, though that's

"He does tend to pull his punches, you know."

not saying a great deal! Tony scared! You don't know what you're talking about—or maybe you do! You'd like to fight tomorrow, wouldn't you, and lose the match for us? Well, if Tony is ill I suppose you'll have to take it over, but if you say that he's scared we'll wait until he's better and then stage a private bout, you against him. How would that suit you?"

Pete Taylor threw his pipe down with a rattle.

"Shut up, both of you," he growled, and then, to Mary: "I'm sorry, Miss Dacres, but——"

"That's all right, Pete," she said smiling.

The trainer turned back to the two young men.

"We've had enough of this," he grunted. "I'm going

round to see Tony. George, you'd better come with me. Stacey, I'll get in touch with you either later tonight or early tomorrow morning. You'd better look your kit out in case you're needed."

Pete had a way with him. George nodded, and Stacey sullenly agreed to the proposal. When he took his leave of Mary he made a point of being very affable—she was an attractive girl.

"I reckon you'll see me in the ring tomorrow night," he smiled. "George and Pete are a little prejudiced!"

Mary's glance was cool and level.

"Maybe," she murmured, and left it at that. Stacey himself, however, had no real doubts regarding his own judgment. Tony Beresford was scared and would not fight in the Beckley match. To give him his due, Tom Stacey really believed this.

When, halfway through the morning of the next day, Mary encountered him for the second time, in the store where he worked, he was eager to tell her the latest development.

"Well, Miss Dacres, it's happened as I said it would. Beresford won't fight tonight. Pete did his best with him, but it's no good. Beresford won't have a doctor, just says he isn't fit enough to fight. Scared, that's what he is!"

Mary picked up the book she had purchased, gave Stacey the benefit once more of her cool, impersonal stare.

"You think so?" she murmured, as she departed. Tom Stacey gazed after her irritably.

She left the store and went immediately to the offices of Spottiswoode & Spottiswoode, Solicitors. There she discovered, without surprise, that Tony was, officially at all events, unwell. He was at home. Mary made her way back to the upper town and to Tony's house. His parents were out, and the maid was not sure that Master Tony wanted to see anyone—he wasn't well and was in his room.

"Tell him that Miss Dacres has called," said Mary, "and that she must see him. Tell him that it's urgent, please."

What steps she would have taken had he refused to see her she had not decided, nor was it necessary to do so, for

after some minutes Tony came down and led the way into the morning-room. Mary did not know him well, but she was sure that his pallor was not normal and that the lines of strain round his mouth and eyes were unusual.

On the table was lying the morning paper, the local *Manston Green Gazette*, open at the middle page. Tony brushed past her, picked up the paper and thrust it aside. The movement was hurried and brusque.

"I came to see how you are," she said quietly. "I was so sorry to hear that you're not well."

"Oh—thanks. But you said it was urgent."

"Yes, I did, didn't I?" She was silent for a moment and then looked across at him steadily. "Tony, why won't you fight Knights?"

"I've told you, and the others. I'm not fit. That's all. Why can't you stop worrying me?" He broke off, listening. A ring had sounded at the front door.

He crossed the room swiftly, and Mary had again a strong impression that he was frightened. He opened the door an inch or so and stood there peering out into the hall while the maid crossed it to the front door.

Mary's eyes fell on the local paper. Quickly she leaned forward and drew it towards her. It was still open at the middle page. The first item she saw was headed *Man Found Injured in Moxon Street;* and as she rapidly read the half-dozen lines describing how a man had been found beaten up in Moxon Street, which she gathered was situated in the lower town, how he had been taken to hospital and that the police were waiting for him to recover consciousness when it was hoped that he would be able to identify his assailant, her eyes narrowed. Was it possible that *Tony* . . .?

He came back from the door.

"It was only the postman," he muttered.

"Not the police? That must have been a relief."

She spoke almost before she thought. Tony came to a sudden halt. One hand was clenched tight on the edge of the table so that the knuckles showed white.

He stood there peering out into the hall.

"You—you know?"

"I just guessed. Tony, you'd better tell me, hadn't you? This man"—she tapped the newspaper—"what happened?"

He slumped heavily into a chair. When he spoke his voice was not much above a whisper.

"Yes. I thought I'd killed him. Thank God I didn't! But maybe he'll die yet—he hit his head against the kerb."

And then it all came out, the whole story, while the girl sat silently listening. She did not speak until he had come to an end.

"I see. Tony, you should have gone to the police at once. It was silly not to. It *was* an accident, and the child could have proved that you had good reason to defend yourself."

"I know. I've been trying to work up enough courage to go. Funny, you seem to have given it to me." He managed a half-smile. "I'll go straight away."

"No, wait a moment, Tony. Tell me—you say you recognized the child? Who is she and where does she live?"

"With her father. That's old Smart. He's wealthy now, but he still lives over the shop in Moxon Street. Why?"

She was on her feet and going to the door.

"Stay here, Tony. Don't do anything until I get back. Not a thing. Promise?"

"Yes, I will if you like. But——"

"Good. I won't be long."

She was gone, leaving Tony to stare after her, bewildered. There was no particular reason why he should trust her, and yet he did.

Lunch came and went and she still had not returned. Then he was called to the phone, to hear her voice at the other end.

"Tony? Good! Can you come round to George's at once? Yes, at once. And Tony, it's all right. Honestly, there's nothing to worry about. Come at once."

He did as he was told, not thinking to question her orders. Nor did it occur to him to mistrust her statement that everything was all right.

Up in George's den he found George himself, Mary, Pete Taylor and Tom Stacey. It was early-closing day in Manston Green, which enabled Stacey to be present, though George had opened his eyes when Mary had insisted on Stacey being invited. Now, as Tony came into the room, there was a sudden cessation in the conversation; Tom Stacey glanced at Tony and then away again, obviously embarrassed.

It was Mary who took charge of the situation.

"Hallo, Tony. We asked you to come up to discuss tactics for tonight."

"For tonight? But I'm not fighting tonight."

"Oh, yes, you are. There's no reason why you shouldn't. You see, you didn't kill anyone last night. You didn't even injure anyone; at least, the tough you knocked out was all right again within five minutes. His skull is so thick a crack on a kerb doesn't have much effect."

"I want to say I'm sorry."

Tony blinked at her and then looked round at the others.

"I don't understand," he muttered. "There was a whole lot of blood."

Pete Taylor rose to his feet.

"Of course there was blood, but that didn't mean anything. That's the trouble with boxers—too squeamish. It's all right, my lad, Miss Dacres—oh, all right, Mary, then—has told us all about it. She's been down to Moxon Street, missed her lunch, too, and found that kid, the one whose dog was being kicked. It was Bert Patterson you knocked out. He was on his feet again in a few minutes. But by sheer chance there was another man, a stranger, beaten up some hours later probably by a gang of the roughs down there. He's the one in hospital now. Just coincidence, Tony, and there's nothing to worry about."

Tony drew a deep breath. He looked across at Mary, who smiled at him.

"You owe me a lunch," she said gently.

Tony was not a great hand at the happy phrase, but he managed one now.

"I owe you more than that," was his reply.

Tom Stacey, leaning against the mantelpiece, broke his silence.

"Beresford, I want to say I'm sorry. I said things last night after you'd gone that I oughtn't to have said—I realize that now. We haven't hit it off in the past, but that's been my fault. I've been jealous, I suppose. I—I wish you all the best tonight."

Everyone in the room realized what an effort it must have been for Tom Stacey of all people to speak like this; but it was Mary Dacres who really understood what courage it had entailed. She caught his eye and smiled slowly.

Tony spoke:

"Thanks, Stacey, that's decent of you. Only——"

"Only nothing," broke in George decisively. "You're fighting tonight, old lad. You don't think Pete and I have worked out exactly how you can beat Knights just to have the pleasure of hearing you argue about whether you'll fight him or not, do you? And, by the way, there aren't any kerbstones in a boxing ring. So don't be a fool!"

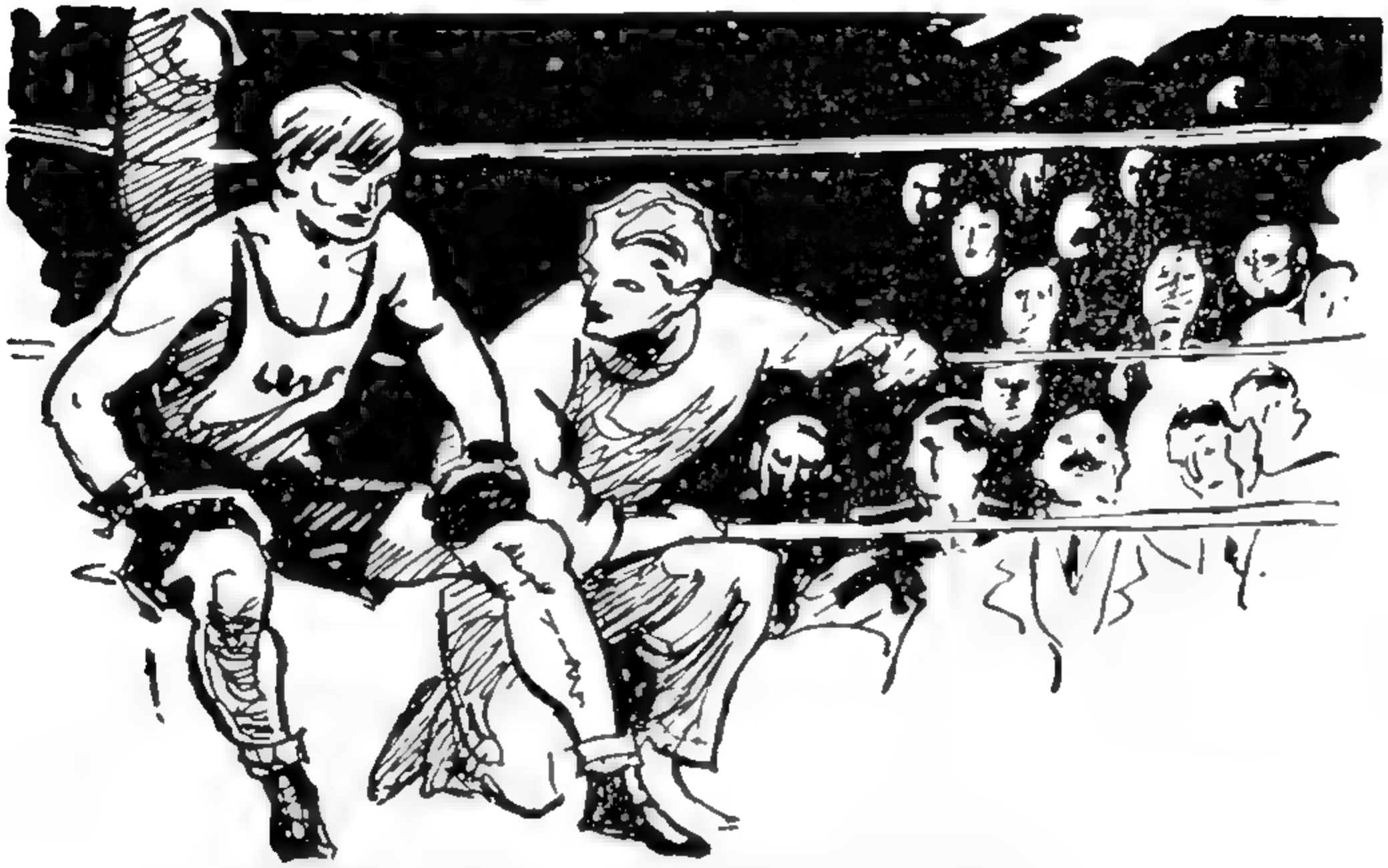
There was a short silence. Tony's eyes had sought Mary's. She clinched the matter. "You'll fight tonight, won't you, Tony? I think it's the least you can do."

He barely hesitated then.

"Yes, of course I'll fight. Thanks, Mary."

. . . . .

At exactly nine o'clock that same evening, in the spacious hall rented by the Manston Green A.B.C., Tony Beresford started in to do his best to return thanks in practical fashion. It was at that hour that the middle-weight bout commenced and, as it happened, upon the result of the bout the match with the neighbouring town of Beckley depended. Manston Green had taken the fly-weight and the bantam-weight bouts and had begun to anticipate decisive victory in the match. Beckley, however, had come back with victories in the feather-weight and the light-weight fights, and the welter-weight had been such a close contest that it had been impossible to



"Remember," said George, talking quietly in Tony's ear.

differentiate between the Manston Green man and the Beckley representative. Neither light-heavy nor heavy-weight bouts were to be staged, and therefore the result of the match depended upon the middle-weight fight between Tony Beresford and Knights, the Beckley star, who was by no means an opponent to be disregarded. Not long come to Beckley, Tony had never met him before.

"Remember," said George, talking quietly in Tony's ear, "hold him off for the first round. Go carefully, and let him expend a bit of his energy. They say he always comes in like a rocket. If you hold him for the first round and say half the second, you'll be all right. But watch that right of his, it's unorthodox and therefore dangerous. You mix it when you want to, not when he does, see? So keep away from him, and use your great clodhopping feet!"

Tony grinned, but nodded. He felt a new man. The reaction from the strain of the previous night was so terrific that he felt as though he could knock out an ox. But he realized that he must be wary. George knew what he was

talking about, and George realized that Tony, feeling on top of the world, might run his head into danger.

Glancing across the hall, at the thronged spectators, Tony caught Mary's eye. He smiled and raised his hand. He'd show Beckley that their star was of the falling variety.

The gong sounded and Tony was out into the middle of the ring. Knights, however, lean, brown and obviously tough, met him more than halfway. He came out of his corner like

A devastating, unorthodox attack.

a streak of lightning—and he started to fight, and fight hard, from the moment the gloves touched. George had been right, the Beckley man was relying on a tornado victory.

"Keep him off, keep him off," muttered George to himself as he watched from outside the ring—the match was being fought under A.B.A. rules, of course.

Then he breathed a sigh of relief. Tony was obeying orders. He was boxing, not fighting. And he was using his feet. Knights whipped in his left and instantly followed it with a vicious right hook to the body. Tony was unworried.

The left was slipped, the right was blocked and he was away, dancing out of reach, using his feet as every boxer should use them, whatever his weight. Out of reach—until Knights came at him again, his energy unabated. Another left, another right hook, and this time it was not completely blocked. Without pause that left came through again, and scored. Tony weaved and swayed, got back to the middle of the ring and again Knights was after him. He came in like a whirlwind. Never before had Tony been called upon to withstand such a devastating, unorthodox attack. It was as though the Beckley man had a dozen fists instead of two. It was a temptation to reply in kind, difficult to obey orders and retreat, always retreat, keeping out of harm's way, allowing his opponent to exhaust himself on the desert air. Difficult, too, not to be affected by the whirlwind pace and automatically adopt the same tactics and mix it. But somehow Tony stuck to the policy George and Pete had outlined. At the end of the round he was on his feet and he was not only unmarked, but he was still fresh. Knights was well ahead on points, but George was careful to soothe Tony on this matter.

"Don't bother," he grunted. "You're going to knock this chap out." And then: "Don't forget you've got gloves—and there isn't a kerbstone!"

"It's all right, I'm not afraid of—of anything like that."

"Good. Now, the same tactics again, possibly for the whole round, but maybe not. I'll give you the word if you ought to start in. Right, out you go."

The word, however, did not come during that second round. It was a repetition of the first, with Tony retreating, with Knights piling up the points and at the same time exhausting himself. Nobody, however fit, could stand that gruelling pace for longer than two rounds.

"Right—now it's your turn," said George, just before the gong went for the third and final round. "Get in straight away and fight him. Good luck."

But as Tony left his corner George was wondering whether maybe the counter-attack had been left too late. One round

It was a classic knock-out.

only to go, and a knock-out must be achieved. The Beckley man had too long a lead in points.

The audience gasped as Tony came out of his corner. There was no waiting for Knights to attack now, no retreating, no defensive tactics. Tony was out to end the fight.

This time it was he who met Knights over the halfway line, and he who instantly took the offensive. Knights had about half the energy he had originally possessed; Tony was nearly as fresh as when he had started. George's policy, approved by Pete, had been the right one: it was now just a question of whether the knock-out could be achieved in the time.

Out came Tony's left to the head, which was avoided, but it was followed by a right to the body which found its mark. Tony was away, but came back at once. Another jabbing right to the body, a left feint to the head, another to the body, so rapidly that half the audience could not follow the glove, and Knights was swaying. He had fought himself to a standstill in the first two rounds and now he had to stand up to an opponent turned suddenly from a wary, weaving, dancing shadow, to a human dynamo of devastating energy whose gloves felt as though they were packed with lead.

But Knights was game. He had only to hang on, and on points the bout must be his. He slipped a left lead and retreated, his feet sliding across the canvas, instinctively skilful. And then he saw his chance. Tony, as he came after him, dropped his guard slightly. Knights summoned everything he had and out came his left.

It was exactly what Tony had wanted. It was his favourite method of ending a fight to lure a tiring opponent into a lead which he thought was unexpected. As the left came across Tony slipped it easily and his own right came round in a right-cross. Knights rocked as the blow took him on the jaw. It did not finish him, but his guard dropped; he was open to a devastating left follow to the point.

"That's it," muttered George to himself, as he watched. He had seen this often enough before.

He was right. With twenty seconds to spare before the round ended, Tony's left came through like a piston. It was a classic knock-out. Knights swayed, his hands fell and he was down. It was hardly necessary to count him out. Manston Green had won the match. Tony Beresford had pulled it off.

Or maybe it was Mary Dacres who really pulled it off! That was what Tony said afterwards, at the celebration supper; and there were plenty who agreed with him.

It was actually Tom Stacey who proposed her health, coupled with Tony's.

"The best fight I ever saw," he said quietly. "But if it hadn't been for Mary . . ."

"That's right," was George's comment afterwards. "And it isn't every girl who could win in a middle-weight fight!"

GERALD KERSH

★

Irongut and the brown mouse

LIKE Sherlock Holmes, I sometimes think that I might write a monograph . . . on 'The Technique of Worming-out Case Histories,' on 'How to Write Letters to Film Magnates,' and especially 'On Huts.' I know huts, especially Army huts. I have lain in elegant huts, partly constructed of brick, brand-new, still smelling of freshly-planed wood. I have passed formidable nights in Nissen huts, looking up at the reflections of diffused moonlight upon the corrugations of the iron, and feeling like Jonah in the whale's belly. I have some experience of sectional huts . . . I have seen them tossed out of a lorry in piles, like packs of cards: shuffled, dealt, and put up; and have slept in them by nightfall, gazing at the pencilled section-numbers on the boards, between which the east winds thrust their edged and pointed Khyber knives. But the hut in which I sometimes feel that I have left a portion of my soul is a hut called—*The Black Hut.*

At least thirty years old, it was still surviving in a summer camp for British infantry in the Second World War. The Black Hut was made of boards, like any other hut; only age had given it character. Thousands of men had settled down and lived in it. Nearby, in the same camp, there were many

more elegant and comfortable huts; but nobody remembers these. The Black Hut is the place which all the best men drag up into memory in their reminiscences.

I slept near the door. The cot next to mine was occupied by an old regular soldier whose life had been one long and unrelenting war. If only these words could be reinforced with moving pictures—if this were, say, television—I might convey to you something of the real aspect of Private Irongut, as we called him. His nickname grew out of his capacity for impossible mixtures of drink. The inside of the man must have been plated with something acid-proof. This may be interesting; but the most interesting of all was his face, his figure, and his general manner. Now, how can I describe him?

His head might have been modelled by a vigorous but unskilful sculptor who, trying to make a likeness of a broken gladiator, has, by an unrepeatable lucky accident stumbled upon the right thing . . . modelled in red clay and then left to dry and crack in the sun. Irongut had fought his way out of childhood into adolescence; and had come out of that corner, jabbing and swinging into manhood . . . from which melancholy stage he had leapt—like a man from a table in a pub brawl—into the Army.

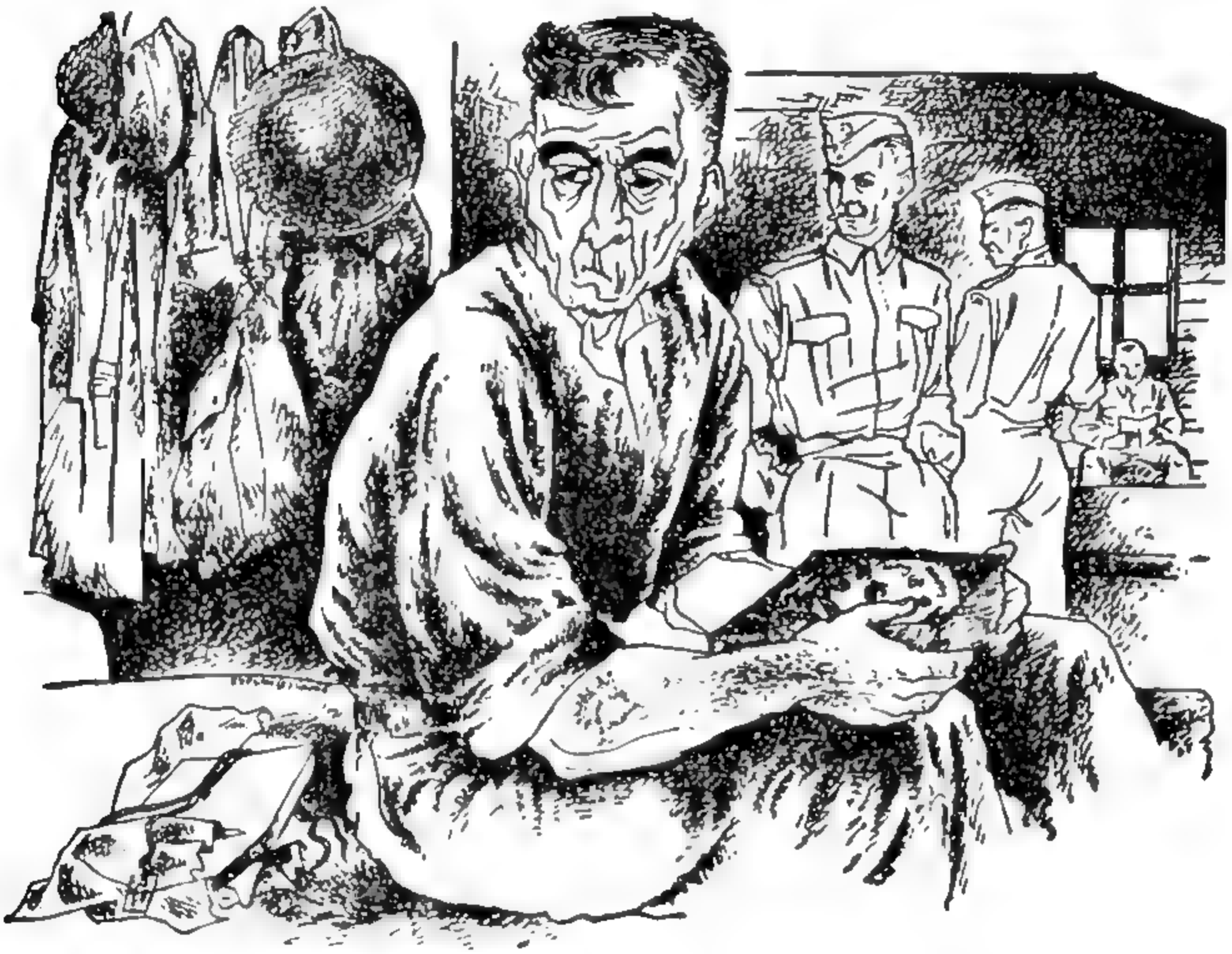
I find that I am telling you the history of Irongut; but let it be. His conduct sheet, as a soldier, was long and black as a February night; he was insubordinate; he got drunk; he struck civilians; he struck his fellow Privates; he struck Lance-Corporals, full Corporals, Lance-Sergeants, full Sergeants; he threatened a Quartermaster; he swore at a Sergeant-Major; he used language at which Rabelais would have hidden his head under the pillow. He was late for parade, absent off parade, idle on parade; he broke out of barracks, broke into barracks, broke windows, broke noses, broke every law of God and man. His worst failing, from the military viewpoint, was uncontrollable temper. Do you remember the cartoon of the peppery old soldier in the L.D.V. who, holding a smoking rifle, cries: "Who went

We called him Private Irongut.

there?" One might draw a similar one of Irongut standing with a left hand near his right ear at the termination of a hook, murmuring, "I didn't quite catch what you said."

Yet there was never anything cruel about the man. I know that in my squad there was a recruit who seemed to be forgotten of God—a nervous imbecile—whom Irongut nursed (in the military sense) like a child, and to whom he never said a really cross word.

I am telling you that I used to sleep next to him in The Black Hut. He was, at that time, about thirty-three years old, but he looked more than forty. His lips were squeezed away until there was a crack where they once had been. A habit of screwing up his face in anger, and in restraint of anger, had given him wrinkles. The fire of his own anger had roasted him away to the dry, red, hard man that I knew.



The parcel contained a small, home-made cake.

He had no friends. His temper was too unstable. There was something on his mind; I never knew what it was, and never shall. Somewhere in the heart of England he had a relation, an aunt I believe. He never wrote to her although she, from time to time, wrote to him. Hers was the only letter he ever received.

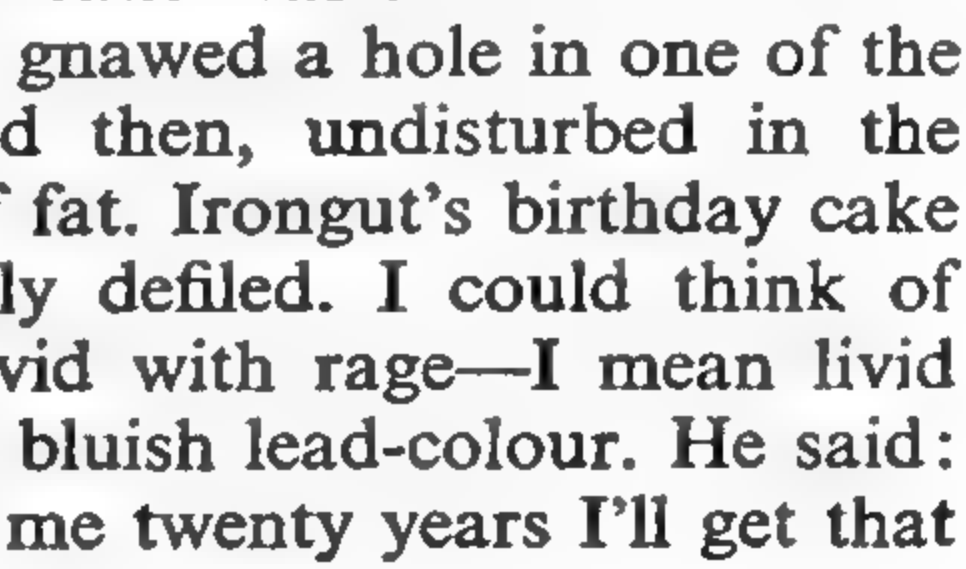
His birthday must have been in February. Upon the

fourteenth of one February he received a parcel. This was an event. Nobody had ever seen him get a parcel before. He opened it, and, in spite of their innate delicacy and their dislike of Irongut, the men in the hut stopped everything and watched him as he opened it. He also was surprised The parcel contained a small cake, home-made and notice-ably home-iced. Upon the pink sugar there was a white inscription: *Many Happy Returns to Roddy*. Somebody said: "Roddy?" And Irongut said: "Do you *mind!*" The tone of his voice drove everybody away. He put the cake back in the box, covered it with the original coverings, and placed it all under his bed. He didn't touch the cake for nearly a month. Then, one day, when I was confined to the hut with a damaged knee, Irongut came in and, seeing me, said: "Have a bit o' cake?"

I simply looked at him, astonished. He picked up the box, took out the cake, and shouted with rage like a wing-hatted Viking rushing a palisade. The cake was ruined. A mouse had been at it. This mouse had gnawed a hole in one of the lower corners of the box, and then, undisturbed in the silence of the night, fed himself fat. Irongut's birthday cake was riddled, ravaged, hopelessly defiled. I could think of nothing to say. Irongut was livid with rage—I mean livid in the literal sense of the term: bluish lead-colour. He said: "I'll get that mouse. If it takes me twenty years I'll get that mouse."

And thereafter we witnessed something comical but terrible. Irongut, who never took anything from anybody, who never forgave and never forgot; Irongut, who was a figure of terror, and a man of whom strong men were a little afraid—Irongut, the man, declared a blood feud against a mouse.

He lay in wait. He spent his spare hours alone in the hut,



in the dark if he could manage it, silent and watchful. He had replaced the cake in the box and left it there as a bait. The mouse, by some fortunate instinct, kept away. One of us suggested that he might, perhaps, buy a mouse-trap. Irongut said: "I want to get him myself." It became a major issue. I remember that a man we called Cockeye said to me, one day: "Oh, by the way, Irongut's mouse came out today. Irongut took a cut at him with a bayonet—fat little brown mouse. 'E missed, and Irongut nearly chased him down the mouse-hole."

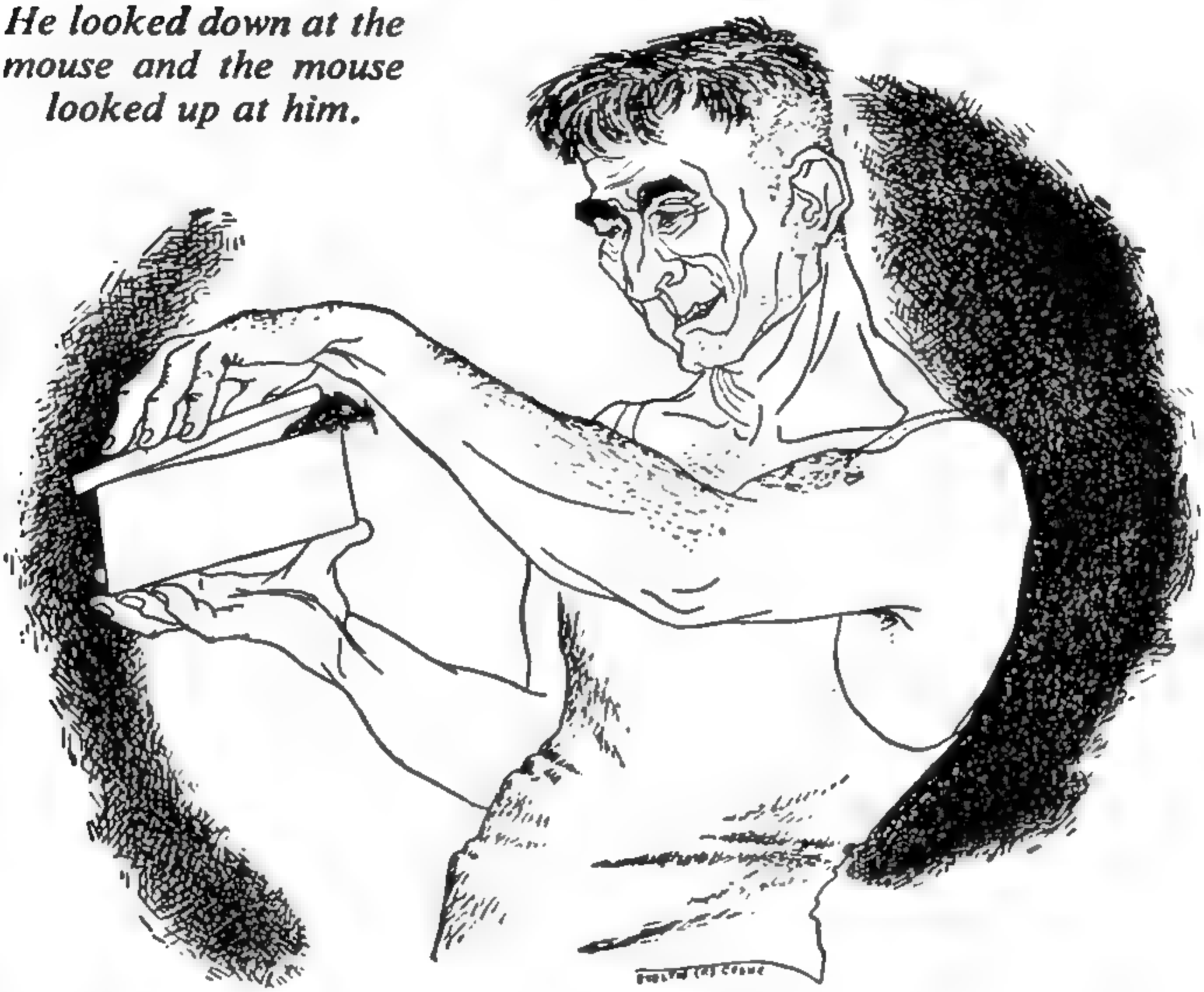
It had been as Cockeye said. Irongut had traced the little brown mouse to its hole in the old Black Hut. This mouse-hole had been cunningly cut in the corner by my bed. It was necessary, therefore, for Irongut to ask a favour. He hated it, but he hated the mouse even more. He had to ask me if I minded changing beds. It was all one to me, and I said so, to which Irongut replied: "Much obliged."

I am not a deep sleeper. It takes me a long time to fall asleep; I was awakened by a grunt. It must have been one o'clock in the morning. I struck a match and, in the sudden glare of it, I saw Irongut dragging at a bayonet, the point of which was deeply embedded in the floor-boards. "What's up?" I asked. Irongut replied: "I missed him by the thickness of your little finger." And he snapped his teeth together and swore that he would get him yet.

Two days later, Irongut caught the mouse. We had been out on a route-march. You know, I daresay, that nowadays a route-march is not simply a matter of marching. In a route-march there is involved a certain amount of field training. We covered about thirty-five miles, involving ourselves in potential enemy air-attacks, and many other things. When we got back we were covered with mud. The mud, as long as it was on our canvas, didn't matter much. But we had to clean our webbing. Polishing and blancoing is, really, not the infliction it is cracked up to be; the cleaning of an entire kit of webbing is over in thirty minutes.

Now Irongut, like nearly everybody else, kept his cleaning

He looked down at the mouse and the mouse looked up at him.



materials in a tin biscuit box. He must have left the lid loose. At midnight I heard, as it were in a dream, something like the ringing of a tiny cracked bell, and sprang awake. I listened. The noise was coming from Irongut's cleaning-tin. I knew instinctively what had happened: the mouse had got into the tin, which was a fairly deep one, and could not get out. The noise I heard was the rapid tapping of its paws against the sides of the tin. I sat up. I do not know what I meant to do. But as I sat up, Irongut awoke and sat up too, flashing a torch. He flashed it upon me first of all, and the light dazzled me. Then he flashed it away and in what I may describe as the backwash of its forward rush of light I saw his face. He said: "Ah!" I am glad that I cannot quite reduplicate that "Ah!" It contained more savagery and gloating and base triumph than I want to be

able to convey to you. In another instant he was out of bed and had the lid of the tin box clamped firmly down. I could hear the mouse, panic-stricken, leaping and scratching inside. Then I saw Irongut smile, panther-like. He lifted the lid by infinitesimal degrees, tilted the tin, and shook it so that the brushes inside it rattled together. The mouse inside, finding one tiny means of egress, thrust its head out; then Irongut kept the tin still. The mouse was caught. In the light of the torch, he looked down at the mouse and the mouse looked up at him. I said nothing. Many seconds passed, but it seemed to me that time stopped.

Irongut and the mouse looked at each other. I remember very distinctly—you will forgive this digression—I remember very distinctly indeed that the eyes of the mouse were not unlike cigarette ends glowing behind blue glass. The eyes of the man, however, were white in the light, while the craggy promontories of his eyebrows and cheekbones threw hard, triangular shadows. It looked like something out of one of those sinister old German films we used to see in the nineteen-twenties.

Then Irongut spoke. This is what he said:

"Why, you little rat, you poor little swine. What are you scared of? Me? What, you? You, you're not worth killing. Scram. Go on, scram out of here, go on back where you belong. Are you a mouse or a man? Go on, scram!"

He had lifted the lid. The mouse, paralysed with fear, dared not move. He picked it up by the tail and dropped it on the floor. Even then, it stood, overwhelmed. He hissed: "*Psssshh!*" The mouse scuttled away. He turned to me then, and said: "Say a word about this and I'll kill you."

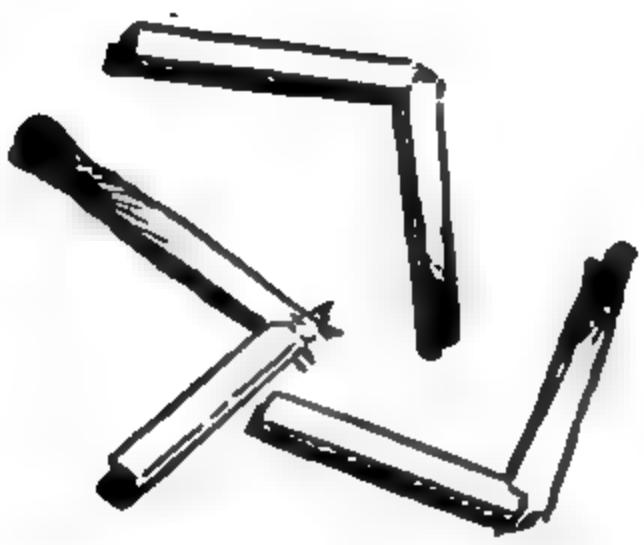
I never did. He remained the sour and intractable man I had always known until he went away. Long afterwards I heard that he had perished upon a certain battle-front, overborne by a tremendous weight of enemies. He had killed six with his bayonet—the bayonet that missed the mouse. His last words were:

"Gimme a couple more clips of ammo."

R. J. MCGREGOR

★

A very simple clue



TOM DENNY and his friend Michael Garrod were holidaying at Treganyon. Tom's father had suggested that Michael should come with them, and both boys had been delighted with the idea.

But things had not turned out as happily as they had hoped. The weather for the first week had been really bad, with heavy rain driven by a strong cold wind. As a consequence, Mr. Denny's fast motor-boat had remained at her moorings in the most sheltered corner of the tiny harbour.

The two boys were bored and irritable through the lack of something interesting to do, until the morning when they had blundered on a half-ruined house hidden away in a neglected waste of parkland about four miles from Treganyon. They had gone out in a desperate search for anything that might enliven the wretched day.

"A month of this," Tom had said, "will drive me right round the bend."

Michael tried to be bright. "It can't go on raining for ever," he said, "and when the sun shines everything will seem happier."

"Don't be so cheerful, Mick," replied Tom. "You are as fed up as I am, and you know it."

"Let's go for a long walk inland for a change, instead of gazing at the sea so much," was Michael's suggestion.

So they had left the sea behind them, wandered off the road and travelled by muddy tracks until they topped a hill and looked down into a bowl-shaped hollow. They both saw the house at the same moment.

"A house!" exclaimed Tom. "Hidden away from everybody."

"A ruin, you mean," said Michael. "Come on."

They ran down the slope, pushed through an overgrown hedge, climbed a crumbling wall, and entered what had once been a well-ordered park. They approached the house by a weedy drive, and climbed some broad steps on to a terrace.

"This must have been a fine place once," declared Tom. "What a pity to see it in this state; roof gone, windows out, walls collapsing. I wonder what knocked it about like this."

"Bombs, I suppose."

"I don't think they had any raids in this district, Mick."

"It might have been an odd bomb dropped by some raider who had lost his bearings."

"Then it must have been a mighty big bomb. Let us explore inside."

They entered the house by one of the gaping windows. They wandered from room to room, avoiding holes in the floors, dodging places that looked unsafe. They climbed to one of the topmost rooms and looked out.

"This is our lucky day, Tom," said Michael. "The sun is breaking through at last, and we have found an interesting old ruin."

"I wonder if there are any dungeons," said Tom.

"Cellars, perhaps, but hardly dungeons. The place is not old enough for that. Let's go and look for cellars."

They ran down, keeping close to the wall where the stairs were wobbly. They found a drunken door which only half hid a flight of stone steps which led down into blackness.

"It is no use going down there without a torch," decided Tom. "There is no knowing what we might walk into. I vote we come again and bring torches with us. We could bring some grub, too, and make a day of it, exploring the place."

"This must have been a fine place once," declared Tom.

Michael answered by gripping Tom's arm and nodding towards the cellar steps. They crept stealthily away and out into a jungly fruit garden.

"There is somebody down there in the cellar," said Michael. "I am certain I heard footsteps."

"Rats, probably," replied Tom.

"Rats don't wear heavy nailed boots, you ass. I tell you I heard——"

What Michael was about to say was cut short by the appearance of a man. He was coming towards them from a doorway in the garden wall, but he had no cut of a gardener

"Get out of here! You're trespassing."

about him. He was obviously in a rage, and at once started to bawl at the two boys.

"Get out of here! You're trespassing. Go on, or I'll crack your heads together. What are you doing here?"

The boys stood their ground, ready to give a tough resistance to the fellow if he tried to put his threat into action.

"What are we doing here?" asked Tom coolly. "Just looking around, that's all."

"You are trespassing," the man repeated.

"Well, we haven't been doing any harm, just exploring a ruined house."

"You've no business here—so get out before it is the worse for you."

"All right, all right," replied Tom. "We were just on our way when you stopped us for a pleasant chat."

"If I ever catch you here again I'll——"

"Yes," interrupted Michael, "you'll what?"

"You'll see. You keep away from here!"

"Come on, Mick," said Tom. "I don't think he likes us."

They left the fellow scowling and muttering, and made for the gap in the hedge by which they had entered. As soon as they were outside and had climbed the hill they turned and looked back. They could see him standing where they had left him, evidently satisfying himself that they were really going.

"A very interesting meeting," said Tom. "There is more in it than just the annoyance of a rustic over trespassers."

"I felt that, too," added Michael. "His rage was largely put on. He wanted to make sure of getting rid of us. Why?"

"We'll find an answer to that, Mick. It will be an adventure. No doubt he was the man you heard in the cellar. He was out of breath. He had been running. He wanted to cut us off."

"Did you see the dirty cobweb on his shoulder? I think that proves it."

"I agree. Now what was he doing in the cellar?"

"He may be a tramp who is living there and doesn't want to be turned out."

"No, he's no tramp. His boots and clothes are in too good a state of repair."

"You mean he was there on some secret business of his own?"

"Perhaps—but he may have been posted there to keep a watch on the place."

Michael shook his head. "Who would put a caretaker in charge of such a ruin as that?"

"I was thinking of him more as a look-out man than as a caretaker,"

"What gives you that idea?"

"I'm surprised at you, Mick. I felt certain you would have noticed it."

"Notice what? You needn't fancy yourself as a crime-club detective."

Tom grinned. "Didn't you see that a car, a big car with

new tyres, had been driven up to the end of the terrace quite recently?"

Michael looked surprised. "Sorry I was so blind," he said. "I suppose I was so busy looking at the house that I didn't notice the ground. But where does that get us?"

"I don't know any more than you do, but I am surely going to pay the place another visit."

"I'm game, Tom. It will be fun trying to get the better of the watchman—if he is a watchman."

They hurried back, and were greeted by Tom's father. "It's going to be fine at last," he said. "Where have you been?"

"We went for a long walk," replied Tom, "and we found a ruined mansion." But he made no comment about the man they had met there.

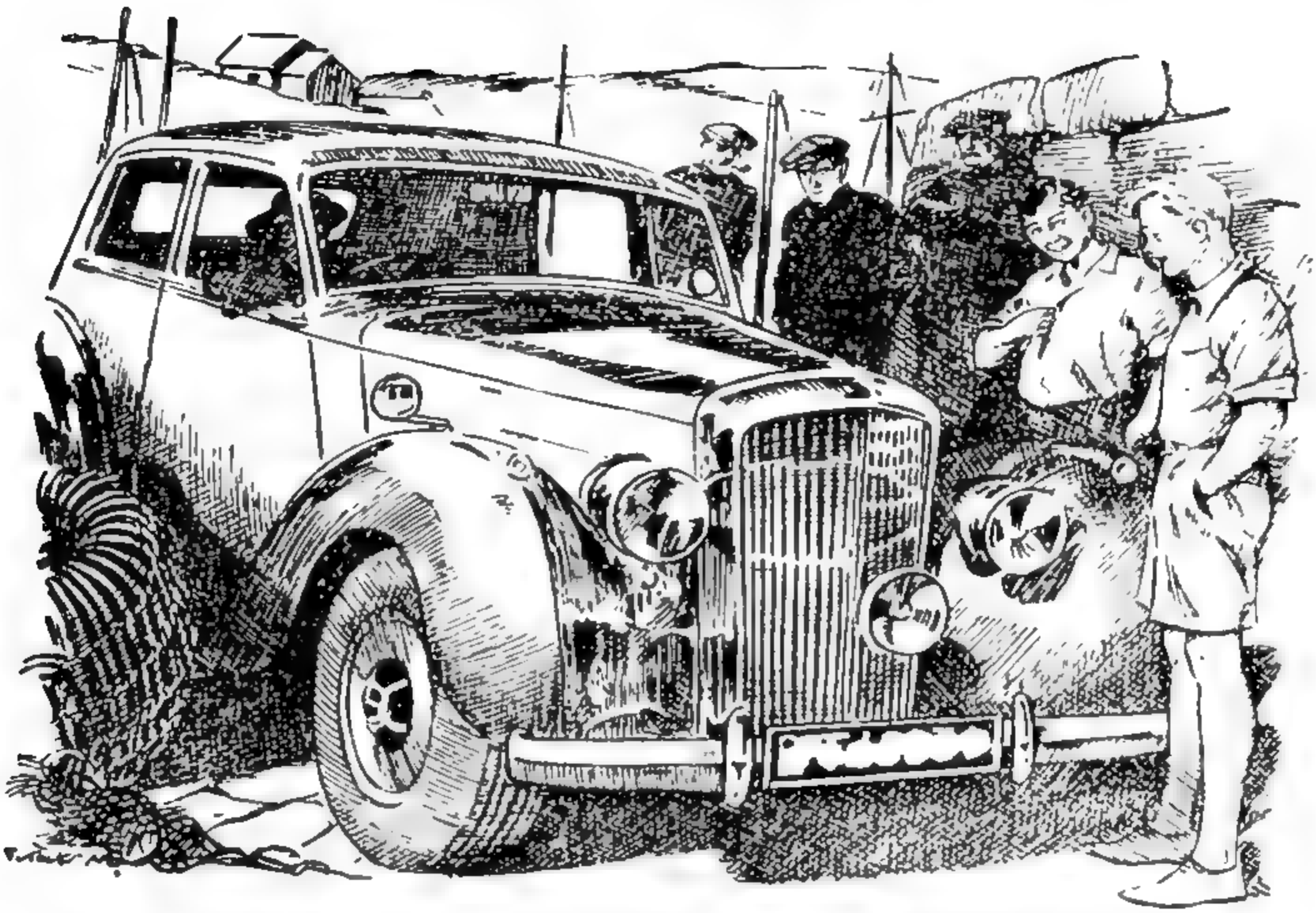
During the afternoon the sun shone brightly. The two boys and Mr. Denny went down to the harbour and polished up their boat, tested the engine, and saw that she was ready for a trip as soon as the sea had calmed down. Then they watched the fishermen making preparations to put to sea again after the long spell of bad weather.

Mr. Denny went off and left the boys to amuse themselves. While they were idling on the quay they saw a large car come slowly down the hill, round the sharp bend at the bottom, and along the quay wall.

"Some car!" said Michael.

They strolled along to look at the car. They were not the only admirers of her beautiful lines; fishermen and the usual crowd of harbour loafers gathered round with open comments. The driver got out and stood as though looking for somebody. He was a tall man, well dressed, and of fine build. He deliberately filled a pipe, took a box of matches from his pocket and struck a light.

While puffing vigorously he muttered something to a gaping longshoreman, who nodded towards a yard where a boat was being overhauled. He walked slowly in the direction the man indicated and hesitated a few seconds



They were not the only admirers of her beautiful lines.

before entering the yard. Once more he struck a match and after a few quick puffs threw it to the ground. Then a man came forward and spoke to him. Together they went into a tiny office and shut the door.

Tom nudged Michael, and together they strolled past the place the stranger had entered. When they had walked to the end of the harbour they turned about and paced slowly back again.

"Interested in something?" asked Michael.

"Yes, but it is only a hunch," replied Tom. "I want to have a closer look at that motorist when he comes out."

"Why?"

"Did you take a look at the tyres on his car?"

Michael was silent for a moment; then he said: "I get you."

Four times they wandered along the quay and back. The fourth time they were lucky. The stranger came out just as

Tom laid another match beside the one he had just picked up.

they were passing. Once again he stood long enough to put a match to his pipe, throwing it down within a few seconds.

Tom gripped Michael's arm and pulled him to a stop. They watched while the car was turned about and whisked up the hill.

"Now what?" asked Michael.

For answer Tom stooped down and picked up something he had covered with his foot. He slipped it into his pocket.

"What have you got there?" Michael demanded.

"Nothing much—though it may be. I don't know yet."

"Come on, out with it."

"It's just an idea I have." Tom held out his hand and showed Michael a match stick, snapped in the middle and bent into a right-angle.

"A bent match; there's nothing in that. Or is there?" asked Michael.

"I think there is. You see, I found one in the same shape this morning. Look, here it is."

Tom laid another match beside the one he had just picked up.

"Oh! where did you find that one?"

Tom smiled triumphantly as he replied: "On the terrace of the ruined house."

Michael was silent for a moment. Then he said: "You think there is come connexion?"

"I don't know any more than you do, but I think a great deal. Did you notice the number of that car?"

"Of course," replied Michael, promptly.

"Good! I'll write it down in my diary. We mustn't run the risk of forgetting it."

Michael was inclined to be scornful. "Anyone would think," he said, "that you were on the track of some desperate criminal, or something of the sort."

"We don't know, do we? First that awkward fellow in the ruined house and now this chap in what I feel sure is the car that left its tracks there. Add the similar bent matches and I think we are getting somewhere."

"What can be the connexion between the house and the man in the car?"

"I don't know anything, but I have a hunch."

"What, another one! You and your hunches!" laughed Michael.

Tom said no more but he was very thoughtful as they walked back to tea. He asked his mother if she could arrange for them to have some food to take with them in the morning. "We want," he said, "to have plenty of time to explore the ruined house."

"Polverne Manor," said Mrs. Denny. "I have been inquiring about it. An extra-large bomb dropped on it one night. The owner now refuses to go near it."

During the evening the two friends made their preparations. First they tested two good torches, and then gathered together various odds and ends which they thought might be useful. They put a new film in Michael's camera, set their haversacks ready for packing, and went to bed earlier than usual.

At breakfast the next morning Tom said: "Dad!"

His father laughed outright. "Come on, out with it," he said. "When you say 'Dad' in that tone I know you want something."

"Well, Dad, seeing how clear the day is I wondered if you would lend me your binoculars for once."

"And I was going to sit on the headland this morning and watch for passing ships! But I'll lend them to you if you will promise to handle them with great care."

The promise was given, and then Mr. Denny added: "Don't stay out too long. We might take the boat out if it stays fine. The sea has gone down a lot."

The boys started out in lively spirits, eager for what the day might bring. They talked very little until they reached the top of the hill from which they could see the gaunt skeleton of Polverne Manor.

"Keep down," said Tom. "We don't want to be seen on the skyline if our nasty friend happens to be looking around."

They lay flat, and Tom focused the glasses and swept the park, gardens and house with great care for some minutes.

"Nothing moving," he said at last. "Take the glasses, Mick, and see whether you can spot any signs of life."

Michael scanned the house and its surroundings. At first he saw nothing to attract his special attention. Then he noticed something behind a group of trees, away beyond the house.

"Ah!" he cried. "There are some cottages tucked away there, among those tall trees, and I fancy I can see a thin line of smoke from a chimney."

Tom took back the glasses and looked again. "Yes, I see them now. And you are right about the smoke. There must be someone living there."

"What do we do next?" asked Michael.

"We must try to approach the house without being seen. I think I can see the best way to go."

Tom led the way round to the far side of the rim of the hollow. When they came to a place that offered them fair cover, they descended. Presently they could look out on the ruins. Two cottages were between them and the house, both in a bad state of repair, but neither of them derelict. Smoke was rising lazily from one sound chimney.

"We had better wait here and watch," suggested Tom, taking out the glasses once more.

Michael saw the first movement as soon as Tom did. "There you are," he cried, "the fellow we saw yesterday. He is off to the house."

They watched the man enter the house by a back door. Then Tom jumped up. "Come on," he cried. "Now is our chance. We can get to the ruins while he is busy inside."

Running and dodging, they reached the house without, as they believed, being seen. They entered by an empty window space and crept silently into the hall. There was a dark space under the stairs, and here they hid, crouching and waiting. After ten minutes or so, which seemed like an hour, they heard footsteps, and then the man they had followed passed within two yards of them. He was muttering to himself, but they could make no sense of what he was saying.

They gave him time to get clear of the house. Then Tom sneaked out and peeped from a rent in the wall. He satisfied himself that the fellow was making for the cottage, and then returned to Michael.

"He's gone," he said. "Now for the cellar and the pieces of eight."

Michael snorted. "More likely pieces of rubbish," he said, but he followed Tom readily enough. When they reached the bottom of the steps their torches showed them that there was a whole series of cellars, strongly vaulted, running the whole length of the house.

They wandered from cellar to cellar. There were racks for the storage of wine bottles, piles of rotted straw, wood from broken boxes, heaps of sacking, rubbish and junk everywhere, but nothing to reward their search.

They went over the ground three times, drawing a blank each time, yet Tom was still not satisfied. "That chap does not come down here for nothing," he insisted. "We have missed something. Let us try again."

"Don't disturb any of the rubbish," said Michael, "or he will spot that somebody has been down here."

"That's an idea," said Tom. "Some of these piles of sacking may be hiding something. Look here: this one is looser than the others, as though it had been recently removed."

Then they both stood rigid. They could hear voices, and footsteps on the cellar stairs.

"Quick, we must hide," whispered Tom. With the speed and silence of cats they nipped into the next cellar. "Into

this great box." Tom's voice was trembling, but he did not lose his head. They both flung themselves into a huge wooden box that they had looked into a few minutes earlier. Michael was about to pull the lid down when Tom stopped him.

"No," he hissed. "It may creak if the hinges are rusty."

They crouched down in the dust and cobwebs and dared not move. Their ears were strained and they hardly ventured to breathe. Now they could hear the voices clearly. One was that of the man who had abused them the previous day; the other was quieter and less uncouth. Both boys had the same idea, though they had no means of knowing.

"I shall be glad when it's all gone," growled the rougher voice. The other laughed.

"You've no need to worry, Silas. I'm paying you well."

"Pay! Fat lot of good that will do me if the stuff is found here with me looking after it."

"Don't bother your head. There is only one more load to come in. This place is secret enough, too."

"Another load! This is the first I've heard about another. And I'm not so sure about the place being secret. I caught two boys here yesterday."

"What's that? In here? In this cellar?"

"No, in the garden, but they had been in the house. Two biggish boys they were, and youngsters are inquisitive."

"Pooh! You're worrying about nothing. And if those boys should come here again, well, there is always the deep well in the farthest cellar."

This remark put Tom and Michael into a state of frozen horror, for the man spoke as though there need be no hesitation about murder if there was any risk of interference with his plans. They dared not move their cramped legs until they heard the two men climbing the steps again, Silas grunting as though carrying something heavy.

When at last they dared to ease themselves, Michael whispered: "This is terrible."

"It's wonderful," replied Tom. "We have stumbled on what must at least be smuggling in a big way. Stay where

They crouched down in the dust and cobwebs.

you are. We dare not show ourselves now. That other man sounds much more dangerous than Silas."

They hung about for an hour by Tom's watch. Then they sneaked up the steps, listening for the slightest sound. The place now seemed deserted by all but themselves, and they ran swiftly away to take cover behind a garden wall.

"We had better separate," said Tom. "You go to the left, Mick, and I'll go to the right. We'll meet over the brow of the hill. Don't let yourself be seen. Make use of all the cover you can find."

As far as they could tell no one noticed them as they darted away. They met, about twenty minutes later, hot and dirty, near the place where they had first used the glasses. They stayed long enough to use them again, but there was no sign of Silas or anyone else.

"What do we do now?" asked Michael.

"I think," replied Tom, "it's a police matter. It is too big for us to handle by ourselves. We shall have to ask Dad to come with us. Come on; there's no time to waste."

They at once turned for home, all their ideas of eating lunch out quite forgotten. As they strode away Michael asked: "What did you pick up off the cellar steps as we climbed up. I saw you. What is it this time?"

"It looks like the clue to confirm what we already suspected," replied Tom, holding out yet another bent match.

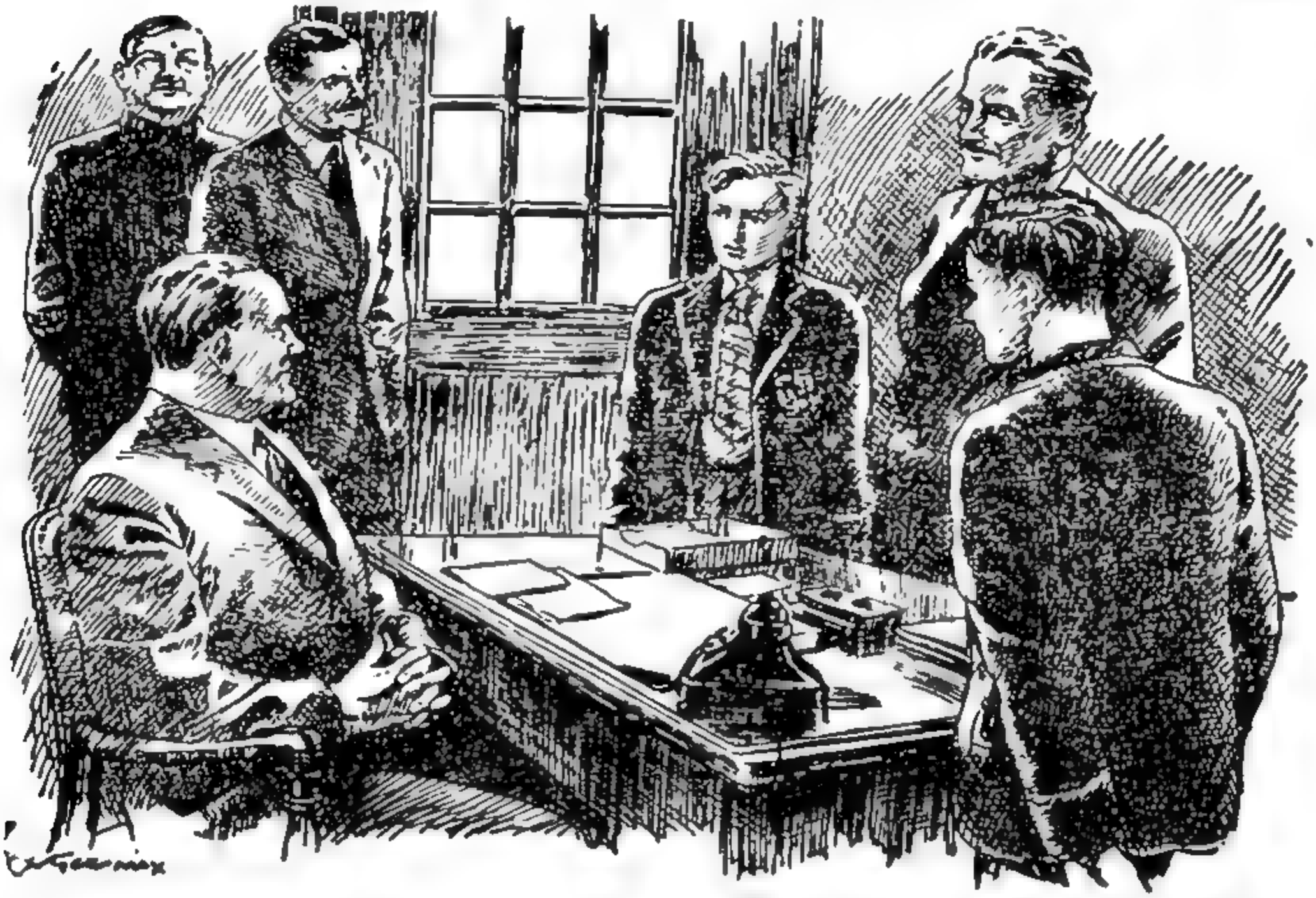
"Yes," cried Michael: "that looks like proof."

As soon as they were back in Treganyon the boys poured out their story to Mr. Denny. After asking them several questions he went into instant action. He took them with him in his car and drove off to the County Police Headquarters. "It is no use going to the local bobby," he said.

After a little obstruction on the part of a bull-necked sergeant they managed to gain an interview with a superintendent named Snelgrove, who listened with patience and growing interest to what they had to say. Then it was his turn to ask questions. When he was satisfied he asked them to wait in another room while he did some 'phoning.

A quarter of an hour later he sent for them again. "I have just been talking to Chief-Inspector Morby, of Scotland Yard. He is flying to St. Eval at once. He wants to see you here. Could you go out and have some tea and then come back?" Mr. Denny agreed that they could.

"Very well. I shall go to the aerodrome with a car to meet



They were taken before a big, genial man.

him. I don't see that he can be here in less than an hour and a half, and it may be longer."

The two boys didn't know how they were going to repress their impatience while waiting to see the great man from Scotland Yard. They could eat very little tea.

They were back at headquarters long before they need have been, but at last they were taken before a big, genial man who demanded their story all over again. He let them finish with no interruption. "A couple of sensible boys," was his only comment. He looked at Snelgrove and nodded.

"Thank you," said the Superintendent. "That will be all

for now. You may return to Treganyon, and you will hardly need me to tell you that you must not say a word to a soul about any of this."

"Well," grumbled Tom, as soon as they were outside, "I call that rotten."

"What is?" asked his father as he started the car for home.

"We discover some dirty work, make ourselves thoroughly useful to Scotland Yard, and are then sent home like a couple of kids to go to bed."

"The police know their job," replied his father. "They can't have youngsters getting in the way when they have desperate work to do."

"Do you think it will be desperate?" asked Michael.

"Possibly, and I feel I would like to take a hand myself, but I am not going to risk making myself unpopular."

When they were back in Treganyon Mr. Denny decided he would try to give the boys some compensation for their disappointment. "Anybody game for a trip in the boat?" he asked quietly.

Whoops of joy came in reply, and not long afterwards the *Kittiwake* was being gently pushed off from her moorings. The sea was now remarkably calm, there was a round and ruddy moon just rising, and the air was pleasantly warm.

"What a change from a couple of days ago," remarked Tom.

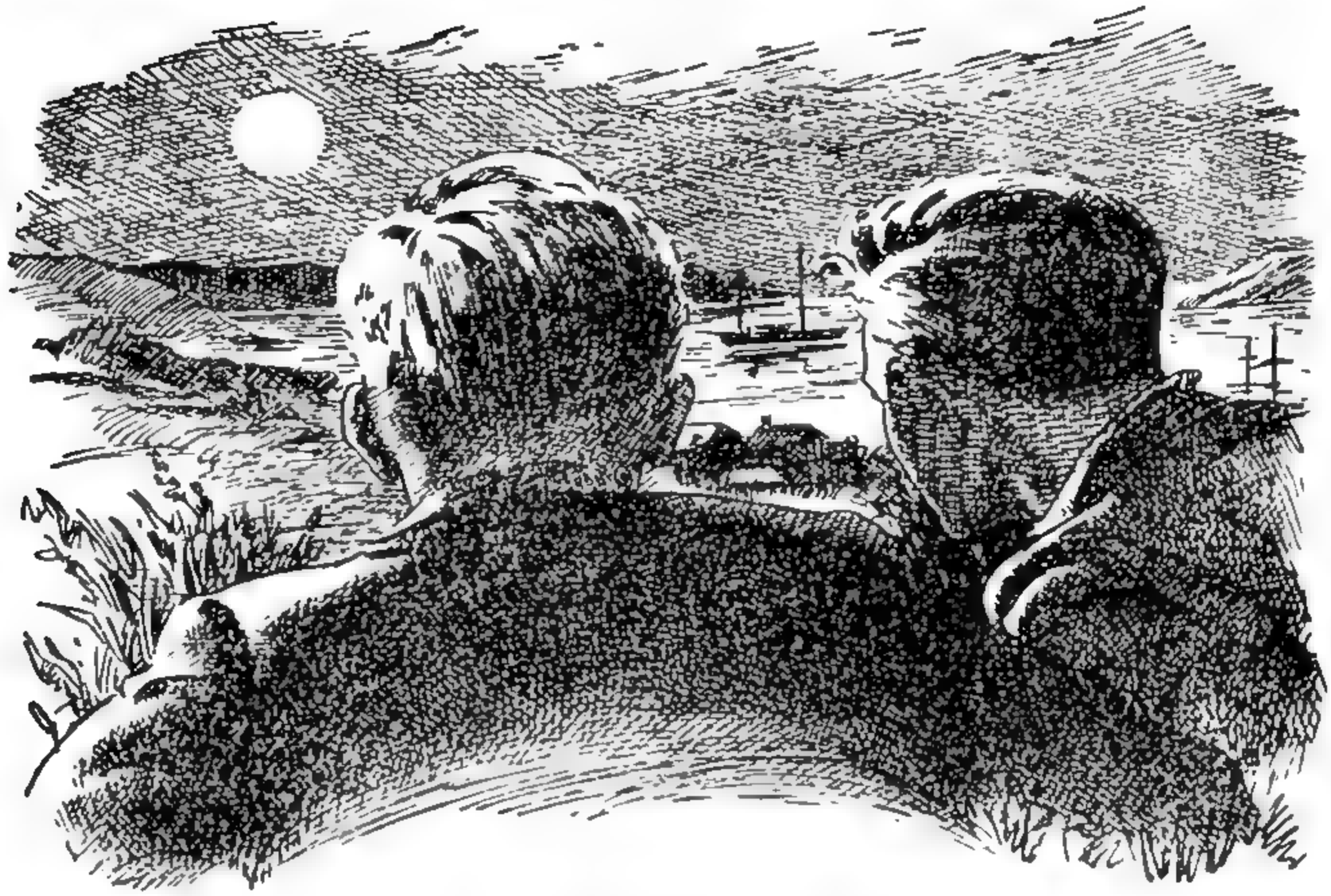
"Yes," replied Michael, "but if the weather had been fine and warm all the time I don't suppose we should ever have found Polverne Manor."

"Let her rip, Dad," said Tom. "I love a bit of speed."

Mr. Denny laughed, and within a few seconds the *Kittiwake* was speeding over the water as though she was alive and enjoying the exercise of her own strength. Presently she was steadied down to a good cruising speed. Michael was busy with the glasses.

"What are you spying at?" asked Tom.

"That boat out there. She is a French fishing boat, I think. Can we get out and make a few rings round her?"



"Do you see what I see?" asked Michael.

Mr. Denny shook his head. "We must go home," he said, "or we shall be late for the evening meal."

That night neither boy could sleep. Not long after midnight Tom looked out. He could see the broad silver path made by the moon's light on the sea. At once he made up his mind about what he was going to do. "Are you awake, Mick?" he asked.

"Yes. What are you doing?"

"I'm going out. Coming?"

"Rather! Can we get out without being heard?"

"We can try."

They dragged on some clothes and rubber-soled shoes and stole from the house. Tom led the way to the headland. They lay down and gazed out to sea.

"Do you see what I see?" asked Michael after a few minutes.

"What?" asked Tom.

"Just over there in the path of the moon's light, rather a

Silently they pushed off.

long way out—isn't that the boat we saw during the evening?"

"I believe it is," said Tom. "And do you hear what I hear?"

Michael listened carefully. "Yes, the distant throb of a motor-boat. You don't think——?" He paused, staring, for he thought he could see a small craft approaching the bigger one they had been watching.

"I shouldn't be surprised if we are looking on the first act of tonight's play," declared Tom.

"I had much the same idea," replied Michael. "I wish we knew where the third act will take place."

Tom paused before he replied. Then he said: "I wonder if I dare?"

"Dare take the *Kittiwake* out so that we can see what is going on, do you mean?"

Tom laughed. "We seem to have only one set of ideas between us tonight," he said. "What do you think?"

"Has your father ever let you take the boat out alone before?"

"No, but he has left me to manage her by myself when we have been out together."

"Well, I'm game to back you up if there is any trouble, but you must make the decision about taking out the *Kittiwake*."

After a slight hesitation Tom made up his mind. "Come on," he said.

They trotted quietly down to the harbour, keeping as much as possible in shadow, especially when they neared the part of the harbour where the *Kittiwake* lay. They sneaked down the steps and tumbled aboard just as the church clock boomed out two o'clock. Silently they pushed off. They did not wish to start the engine until they were clear of the harbour, but they had a hard task getting so far by heaving and pushing at anything that might help them on their way.

At last Tom felt it would be safe to start up. The tide was turning and would soon be driving them back unless they used some of the power that lay in their engine. To his delight she fired at once without any explosive stutters, and he was able to chug quietly out to sea.

When they were nearly a mile off the coast Tom switched off his engine. "Listen," he said to Michael. For minutes they strained their ear for any sound, but could hear nothing.

"I think," suggested Michael, "that we should get down towards Skeleton Cove."

"Why?" asked Tom.

"Well, I was looking at the map just before I went to bed, and I imagine that a cargo going to Polverne Manor would probably be landed there. It is the nearest cove to the house and there is a fairly decent road running up the valley."

"Very well, we will run down that way, but we mustn't show ourselves or we may head them off. That would upset whatever plans the police have made."

"If we keep close inshore we shan't be noticed," said Michael.

"Probably not," declared Tom. "We should most likely tear the bottom out of the *Kittiwake* and sink her and drown ourselves. However, let's go."

They cruised quietly down the coast until Michael cried: "There it is; that is Skeleton Cove. There is a deep-water channel just this side of it. We can creep in there and keep watch."

"I hope you are right about the deep water."

"It's marked on that ordnance survey map of the district I brought down with me. There is a hundred and twenty feet of water close in to the cliff."

Very cautiously Tom headed the *Kittiwake* in towards the dark patch of water under a tall cliff. "This is as near as I dare go," he said at last.

For half an hour they lay there, gently rocking, keeping a keen look-out. At last Michael spoke: "I hope," he said, "we haven't come on a wild-goose chase; I mean, I hope I haven't guessed wrong about where——"

Tom held up his hand. There was the clear sound of a motor-boat near enough to be heard plainly. "Only just started up," whispered Tom. "Must have drifted in with the tide. Can you see her?"

Michael peered ahead. "Yes," he said, at last, "there she is, heading straight for the cove. So I was right after all."

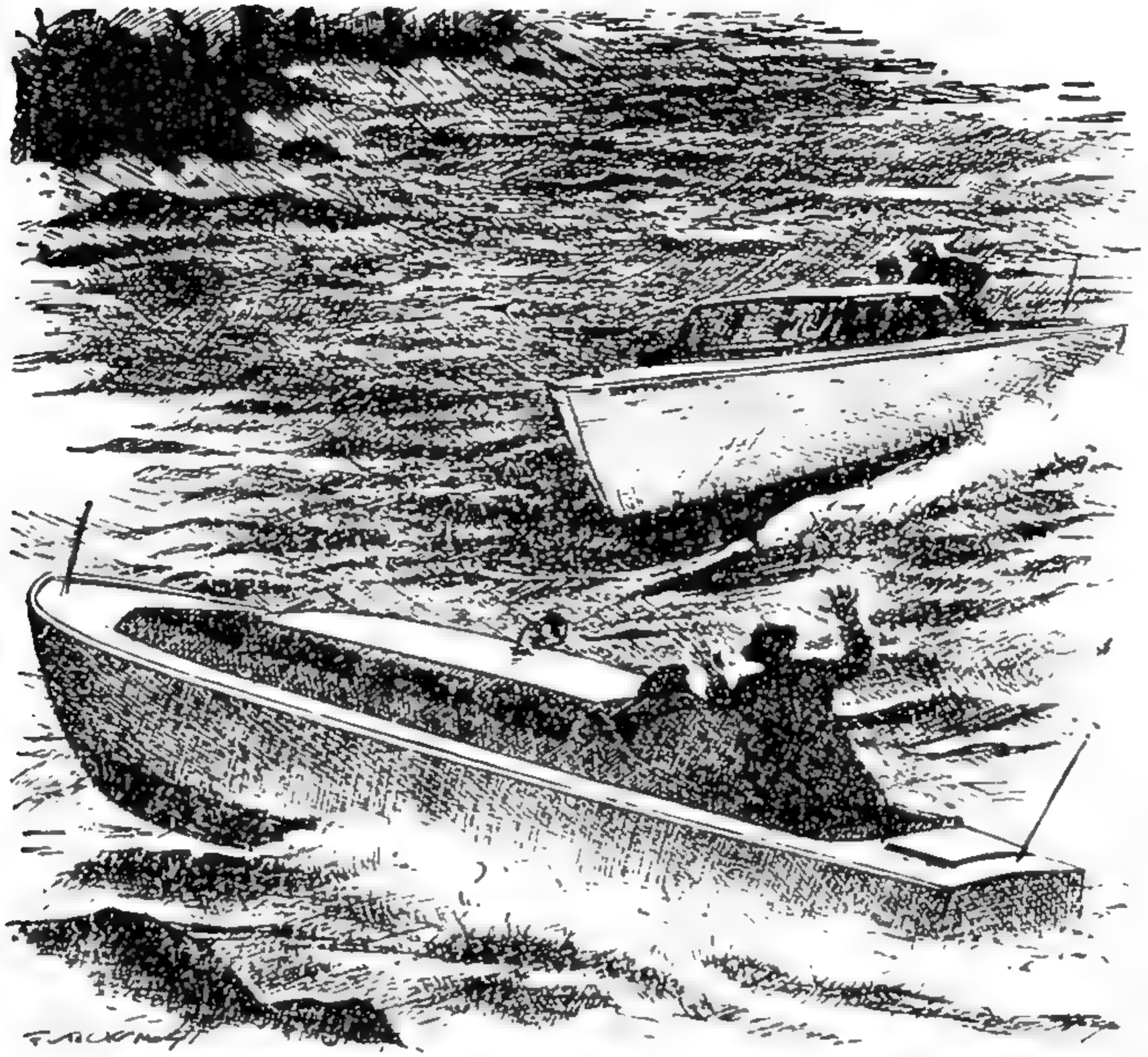
"I have an idea, Mick. As soon as that craft is well up into the cove we will cruise outside to cut her off in case she tries to escape."

Ten minutes later this idea was put into action. The *Kittiwake* was laid at the entrance to Skeleton Cove, far enough out not to be very noticeable to those on the beach, and near enough to give instant chase to any escaping craft.

Then came an outburst of shouting from the shore. "I wish we were there," cried Tom. But then there was a distant sound of three rapid shots. "I'm glad we aren't there," he said.

"The boat's coming out again," cried Michael.

Tom had the engine going again in a second. "There she



The Kittiwake *roared into her top speed and cut in front of the oncoming boat.*

goes!" yelled Michael. "She's got some speed on her, too."

Now the *Kittiwake* roared into her top speed and cut across in front of the oncoming boat. Then Tom brought her round in a wide sweep, and headed her straight for the enemy. He prayed that whoever was steering her would turn away in time, because he didn't want to have to do so.

Turn away they did, but not until Tom's resolution had been tested almost to breaking point. He swung round and then began such a hectic half-hour that neither boy was ever able to give a clear account of what happened.

A long series of mad rushes and swoops, hair's-breadth

misses, wild turns with a dozen times a danger of capsizing, and all the time edging the enemy nearer and nearer to the danger of a crash on the rocks. Once the men in the boat tried to turn the tables on the two boys, but the *Kittiwake* behaved splendidly; she had more speed than the other boat and answered her helm quicker.

Tom seemed inspired. He countered every manoeuvre of the smugglers at twice their speed. He had no thought of danger, for his whole mind was absorbed with the one idea that he had to win this fight. Michael watched, fascinated, holding himself steady and helping to support Tom against the risk of being flung overboard; but he was able to give an occasional glance ashore and he could see watchers on the cliff. They appeared to be shouting encouragement, but it was impossible to hear anything they said.

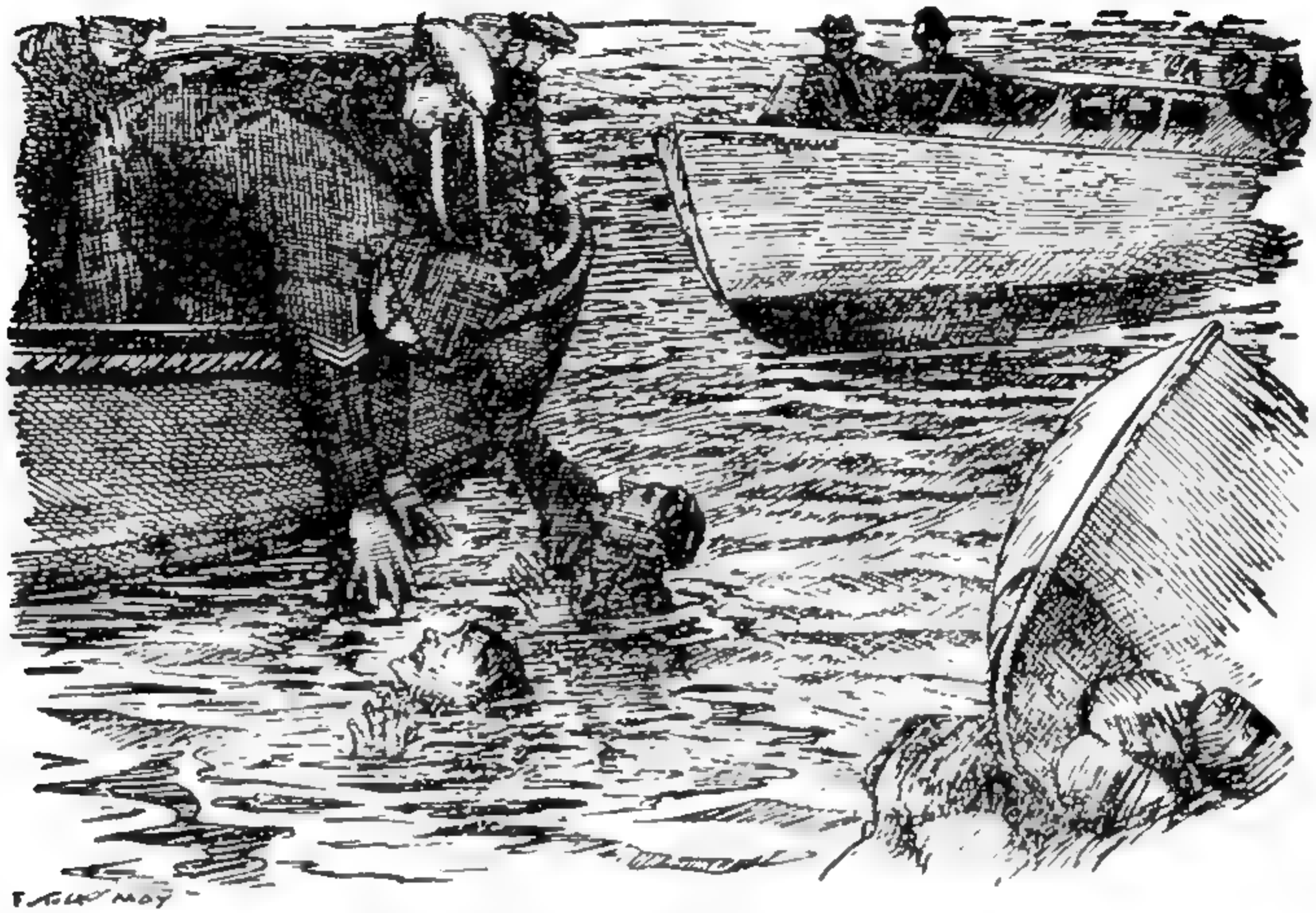
The end came suddenly. Tom had the mad idea that he could only win this fight by actually ramming the enemy. He set the *Kittiwake* hard at her. She made a wild turn, there was a crash and she heaved her stern right up in the air.

Only just in time Tom managed to clear the danger point. He slowed down and then cruised quietly in to see what had happened. It was plain enough. The boat was torn in two: half of it was wedged on a jagged rock and the other half had disappeared. There were two men clinging desperately to the wedged forepart.

"We shall want help before we can take them aboard," said Michael. "We had better run into the cove and take some men aboard."

Ten minutes later Superintendent Snelgrove, the Scotland Yard man and two constables were crowded into the *Kittiwake*. Very little was said, except that another boat was already on the way out from Treganyon.

They met her just as they arrived back at the scene of the wreck. She was manned by two fishermen, a police-sergeant and two other men. The half-drowned and battered survivors were hauled aboard the second boat and they all returned to the harbour.



The half-drowned and battered survivors were hauled on board.

Chief-Inspector Morby spoke to the two boys. "I might have known you wouldn't leave us to do our job in our own way."

"Those two men would have got away if we hadn't been on the spot," claimed Tom.

"No, they wouldn't. We had two fast craft out there shadowing the boat they took their stuff from. Never mind, you did a plucky job, but if you were my boys I should give you both a tough licking for your mad escapade. Off to bed now. I will send for you in the morning."

Both Tom and Michael were surprised that they were able to go back to bed without anyone in the house even dreaming of their desperate feat. But a more surprising thing was that they both fell asleep as soon as they were there.

The following morning at breakfast Tom confessed everything to his father. Mr. Denny looked shocked, and his wife turned pale. "I always thought you were mad," she said.

At ten o'clock there was a conference at police headquarters. Morby took charge of the proceedings.

"We had known for some time," he said, "that many millions of cleverly forged pound notes were being brought into the country. We suspected that this part of the coast had been used for the smuggling, and had asked the local police to help us. When we heard your story we put into operation at once all the plans Superintendent Snelgrove had prepared. We arrested Silas, and he talked freely. The rest would have been easy if you boys had not butted in. As it was you gave me the worst half-hour of my life."

Then he stood up and held out his hand. "If I had sons like you I should be very proud," he said.

"I thought," said Michael, grinning, "you would give us a tough licking."

"I should, too. By the way, I should like to know what gave you the idea that the man Obsensky—the chap with the big car—was the leader of the gang?"

"A very simple clue," replied Tom.

"Most clues are simple. What is it?"

"Have you a box of matches?" asked Tom.

The Inspector handed him over a box. Tom took out a match, struck it, blew it out, gripped it between his thumbnail and his first two fingers, and snapped it; not right through, but just enough to bend it over into a right-angle. He put it on the table. Then he put his hand into his pocket and brought out three more matches similarly bent and laid them beside the first one. The Inspector stared at them.

"I noticed," said Tom, "that every time he struck a match he bent it like that and threw it down. I found one on the terrace of the Manor, I found one on the cellar steps, and I picked up another which I had *seen* him throw down outside Snell's office down on the quay.

Morby laughed aloud. "And you craftily kept that piece of evidence to yourselves. I had better arrange for you to give a course of lectures to some of my younger detectives," he said.

CARL STEPHENSON

★

Leiningen versus the ants

"UNLESS they alter their course, and there's no reason why they should, they'll reach your plantation in two days at the latest."

Leiningen sucked placidly at a cigar about the size of a corn-cob and for a few seconds gazed without answering at the agitated District Commissioner. Then he took the cigar from his lips, and leaned slightly forward. With his bristling grey hairs, bulky nose and lucid eyes he had the look of an ageing and shabby eagle.

"Decent of you," he murmured, "paddling all this way just to give me the tip. But you're pulling my leg, of course, when you say I must do a bunk. Why, even a herd of saurians couldn't drive me from this plantation of mine."

The Brazilian official threw up lean and lanky arms and clawed the air with wildly distended fingers. "Leiningen!" he shouted. "You're insane! They're not creatures you can fight! Ten miles long, two miles wide—ants, nothing but ants! And every single one of them a fiend from hell; before you can spit three times they'll eat a full-grown buffalo to the bones. I tell you if you don't clear out at once there'll be nothing left of you but a skeleton picked as clean as your own plantation."

Leiningen grinned. "Anyway, I'm not an old woman; I'm not going to run for it. And don't think I'm the kind of fathead who tries to fend off lightning with his fists either.

I use my intelligence, old man. . . . When I began this model farm and plantation three years ago I took into account all that could conceivably happen to it. And now I'm ready for anything and everything—including your ants."

The Brazilian rose heavily to his feet. "I've done my best," he gasped. "Your obstinacy endangers not only yourself but the lives of your four hundred workers. You don't know these ants!"

Leiningen accompanied him down to the river, where the Government launch was moored. The vessel cast off. . . . Long after the launch had disappeared round the bend, Leiningen thought he could still hear that dimming, imploring voice: "You don't know them, I tell you! *You don't know them!*"

But the reported enemy was by no means unfamiliar to the planter. Before he started work on his settlement, he had lived long enough in the country to see for himself the fearful devastations sometimes wrought by these ravenous insects in their campaigns for food. But since then he had planned measures of defence accordingly, and these, he was convinced, were in every way adequate to withstand the approaching peril.

Yes, Leiningen had always known how to grapple with life. Even here, in this Brazilian wilderness, his brain had triumphed over every difficulty and danger it had so far encountered. First he had vanquished primal forces by cunning and organization, then he had enlisted the resources of modern science to increase miraculously the yield of his plantation. And now he was sure he would prove more than a match for the 'irresistible' ants.

That same evening, however, Leiningen assembled his workers. He had no intention of waiting till the news reached their ears from other sources. Most of them had been born in the district; the cry "The ants are coming!" was to them an imperative signal for instant, panic-stricken flight, a spring for life itself. But so great was the Indians' trust in Leiningen, in Leiningen's word, and in Leiningen's wisdom,

It was announced by a stampede of animals, timid and savage, hurtling past each other.

that they received his curt tidings, and his orders for the imminent struggle, with the calmness with which they were given. They waited, unafraid, alert, as if for the beginning of a new game or hunt which he had just described to them. The ants were indeed mighty, but not so mighty as the boss. Let them come!

They came at noon the second day. Their approach was announced by the wild unrest of the horses, scarcely controllable now either in stall or under rider, scenting from afar a vapour instinct with horror.

It was announced by a stampede of animals, timid and savage, hurtling past each other; jaguars and pumas flashing by nimble stags of the pampas; bulky tapirs, no longer hunters, themselves hunted, outpacing fleet kinkajous; maddened herds of cattle, heads lowered, nostrils snorting, rushing through tribes of loping monkeys, chattering in a

dementia of terror; then followed the creeping and springing denizens of bush and steppe, big and little rodents, snakes, and lizards.

Pell-mell the rabble swarmed down the hill to the plantation, scattered right and left before the barrier of the water-filled ditch, then sped onwards to the river, where, again hindered, they fled along its bank out of sight.

This water-filled ditch was one of the defence measures which Leiningen had long since prepared against the advent of the ants. It encompassed three sides of the plantation like a huge horseshoe. Twelve feet across, but not very deep, when dry it could hardly be described as an obstacle to either man or beast. But the ends of the 'horseshoe' ran into the river which formed the northern boundary, and fourth side, of the plantation. And at the end nearer the house and outbuildings, in the middle of the plantation, Leiningen had constructed a dam by means of which water from the river could be diverted into the ditch.

So now, by opening the dam, he was able to fling an imposing girdle of water, a huge quadrilateral with the river as its base, completely around the plantation, like the moat encircling a medieval city. Unless the ants were clever enough to build rafts, they had no hope of reaching the plantation, Leiningen concluded.

The twelve-foot water ditch seemed to afford in itself all the security needed. But while awaiting the arrival of the ants, Leiningen made a further improvement. The western section of the ditch ran along the edge of a tamarind wood, and the branches of some great trees reached over the water. Leiningen now had them lopped so that ants could not descend from them within the 'moat.'

The women and children, then the herds of cattle, were escorted by peons on rafts over the river, to remain on the other side in absolute safety until the plunderers had departed. Leiningen gave this instruction, not because he believed the non-combatants were in any danger, but in order to avoid hampering the efficiency of the defenders.

It was a sight one could never forget.

Finally, he made a careful inspection of the 'inner' moat—a smaller ditch lined with concrete, which extended around the hill on which stood the ranch house, barns, stables and other buildings. Into this concrete ditch emptied the inflow pipes from three great petrol tanks. If by some miracle the ants managed to cross the water and reach the plantation, this 'rampart of petrol' would be an absolutely impassable protection for the besieged and their dwellings and stock. Such, at least, was Leiningen's opinion.

He stationed his men at irregular distances along the water ditch, the first line of defence. Then he lay down in his hammock and puffed drowsily away at his pipe until a peon came with the report that the ants had been observed far away in the south.

Leiningen mounted his horse, which at the feel of its master seemed to forget its uneasiness, and rode leisurely in the direction of the threatening offensive. The southern stretch

of ditch—the upper side of the quadrilateral—was nearly three miles long; from its centre one could survey the entire countryside. This was destined to be the scene of the outbreak of war between Leiningen's brain and twenty square miles of life-destroying ants.

It was a sight one could never forget. Over the range of hills, as far as eye could see, crept a darkening hem, ever longer and broader, until the shadow spread across the slope from the east to west, then downwards, downwards, uncannily swift, and all the green herbage of that wide vista was being mown as by a giant sickle, leaving only the vast moving shadow, extending, deepening, and moving rapidly nearer.

When Leiningen's men, behind their barrier of water, perceived the approach of the long-expected foe, they gave vent to their suspense in screams and imprecations. But as the distance began to lessen between the 'sons of hell' and the water ditch, they relapsed into silence. Before the advance of that awe-inspiring throng, their belief in the powers of the boss began to steadily dwindle.

Even Leiningen himself, who had ridden up just in time to restore their loss of heart by a display of unshakable calm, even he could not free himself from a qualm of malaise. Yonder were thousands of millions of voracious jaws bearing down upon him and only a suddenly insignificant, narrow ditch lay between him and his men and being gnawed to the bones 'before you can spit three times.'

Hadn't his brain for once taken on more than it could manage? If the blighters decided to rush the ditch, fill it to the brim with their corpses, there'd still be more than enough to destroy every trace of that cranium of his. The planter's chin jutted; they hadn't got him yet, and he'd see to it they never would. While he could think at all, he'd flout both death and the devil.

The hostile army was approaching in perfect formation; no human battalions, however well-drilled, could ever hope to rival the precision of that advance. Along a front that

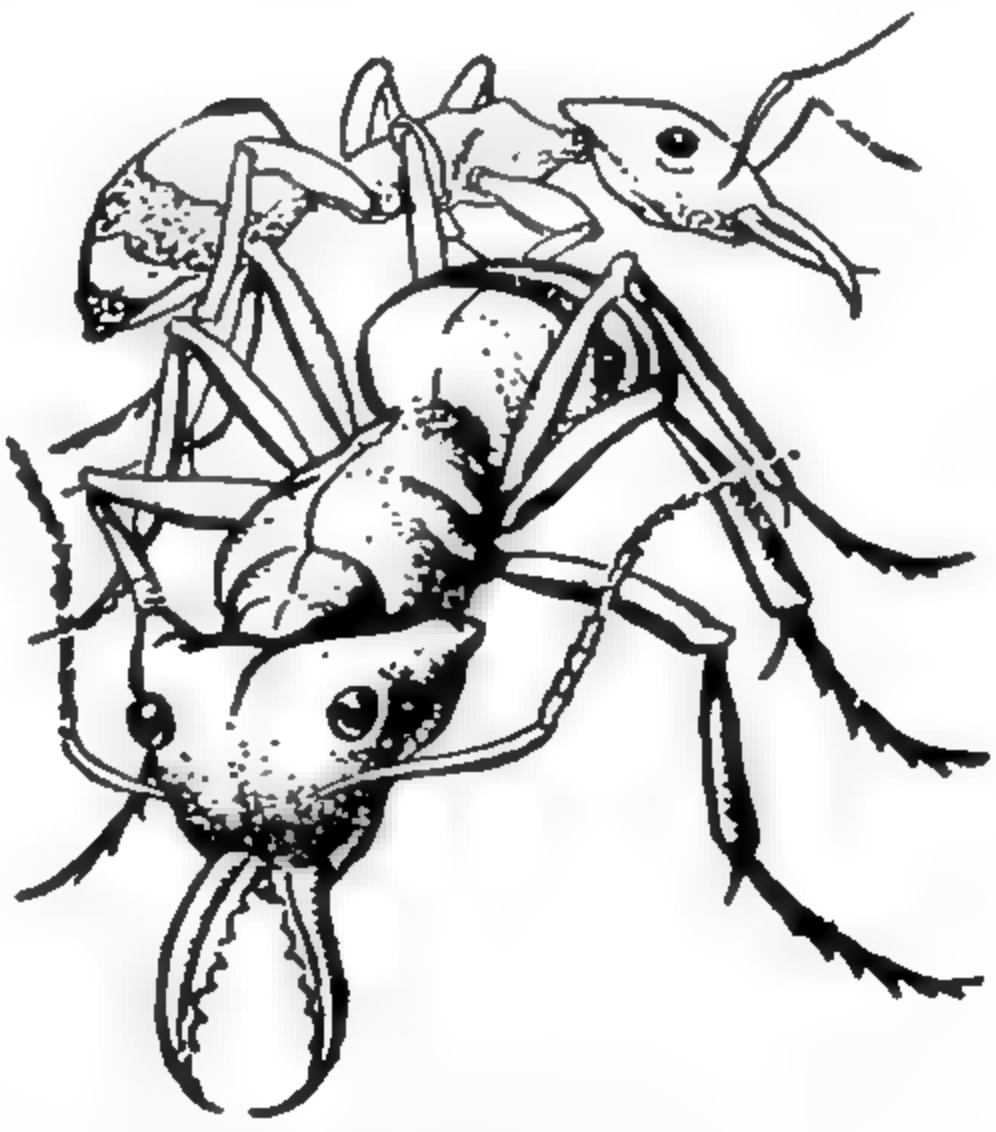
moved forward as uniformly as a straight line, the ants drew nearer and nearer to the water ditch. Then, when they learned through their scouts the nature of the obstacle, the two outlying wings of the army detached themselves from the main body and marched down the western and eastern sides of the ditch.

This surrounding manoeuvre took rather more than an hour to accomplish; no doubt the ants expected that at some point they would find a crossing.

During this outflanking movement by the wings, the army on the centre and southern front remained still. The besieged were therefore able to contemplate at their leisure the thumb-long, reddish-black, long-legged insects; some of the Indians believed they could see, too, intent on them, the brilliant, cold eyes, and the razor-edged mandibles, of this host of infinity.

It is not easy for the average person to imagine that an animal, not to mention an insect, can *think*. But now both the European brain of Leiningen and the primitive brains of the Indians began to stir with the unpleasant foreboding that inside every single one of that deluge of insects dwelt a thought. And that thought was: ditch or no ditch, we'll get your flesh!

Not until four o'clock did the wings reach the 'horseshoe' ends of the ditch, only to find these ran into the great river. Through some kind of secret telegraphy, the report must have then flashed very swiftly along the entire enemy line. And Leiningen, riding—no longer casually—along his side



The brilliant, cold eyes, the razor-edged mandibles.

of the ditch, noticed by energetic and widespread movements of troops that for some unknown reason the news of the check had its greatest effect on the southern front, where the main army was massed. Perhaps the failure to find a way over the ditch was persuading the ants to withdraw from the plantation in search of spoils more easily attainable.

An immense flood of ants, about a hundred yards in width, was pouring in a glimmering-black cataract down the far slope of the ditch. Many thousands were already drowning in the sluggish, creeping flow, but they were followed by troop after troop, who clambered over their sinking comrades, and then themselves served as dying bridges to the reserves hurrying on in their rear.

Shoals of ants were being carried away by the current into the middle of the ditch, where gradually they broke asunder and then, exhausted by their struggles, vanished below the surface. Nevertheless, the wavering, floundering hundred-yard front was remorselessly if slowly advancing towards the besieged on the other bank. Leiningen had been wrong when he supposed the enemy would first have to fill the ditch with their bodies before they could cross; instead, they merely needed to act as stepping-stones, as they swam and sank, to the hordes ever pressing onwards from behind.

Near Leiningen a few mounted herdsmen awaited his orders. He sent one to the weir—the river must be dammed more strongly to increase the speed and power of the water coursing through the ditch.

A second peon was dispatched to the outhouses to bring spades and petrol sprinklers. A third rode away to summon to the zone of the offensive all the men, except the observation posts, on the near-by sections of the ditch, which were not yet actively threatened.

The ants were getting across far more quickly than Leiningen would have deemed possible. Impelled by the mighty cascade behind them, they struggled nearer and nearer to the inner bank. The momentum of the attack was so great that neither the tardy flow of the stream nor its

downward pull could exert its proper force; and into the gap left by every submerging insect hastened a dozen more.

When reinforcements reached Leiningen, the invaders were half-way over. The planter had to admit to himself that it was only by a stroke of luck for him that the ants were attempting the crossing on a relatively short front; had they assaulted simultaneously along the entire length of the ditch, the outlook for the defenders would have been black indeed.

Even as it was, it could hardly be described as rosy, though the planter seemed quite unaware that death in a gruesome form was drawing closer and closer. Such, indeed, was his aura of confidence that the Indians forgot their stupefied fear of the peril only a yard or two away; under the planter's supervision, they began fervidly digging up to the edge of the bank and throwing clods of earth and spadefuls of sand into the midst of the hostile fleet.

The petrol sprinklers, hitherto used to destroy pests and blights on the plantation, were also brought into action. Streams of evil-reeking oil now soared and fell over an enemy already in disorder through the bombardment of earth and sand.

The ants responded to these vigorous and successful measures of defence by further developments of their offensive. Entire clumps of huddling insects began to roll down the opposite bank into the water. At the same time, Leiningen noticed that the ants were now attacking along an ever-widening front. As the numbers both of his men and his petrol sprinklers were severely limited, this rapid extension of the line of battle was becoming an overwhelming danger.

To add to his difficulties, the very clods of earth they flung into that black floating carpet often whirled fragments towards the defenders' side, and here and there dark ribbons were already mounting the inner bank. True, wherever a man saw these they could still be driven back into the water by spadefuls of earth or jets of petrol. But the file of defenders was too sparse and scattered to hold off at all

points these landing parties, and though the peons toiled like madmen their plight became momently more perilous.

One man struck with his spade at an enemy clump, did not draw it back quickly enough from the water; in a trice the wooden haft swarmed with upward-scurrying insects. With a curse he dropped the spade into the ditch; too late, they were already on his body. They lost no time; wherever they encountered bare flesh they bit deeply; a few, bigger than the rest, carried in their hindquarters a sting which injected a burning and paralysing venom. Screaming, frantic with pain, the peon danced and twirled like a dervish.

Realizing that another such casualty, yes, perhaps this alone, might plunge his men into confusion and destroy their morale, Leiningen roared in a bellow louder than the yells of the victim: "Into the petrol, idiot! Douse your paws in the petrol!" The dervish ceased his pirouette as if transfixed, then tore off his shirt and plunged his arm and the ants hanging to it up to the shoulder in one of the large open tins of petrol. But even then the fierce mandibles did not slacken; another peon had to help him squash and detach each separate insect.

Distracted by the episode, some defenders had turned away from the ditch. And now cries of fury, a thudding of spades, and a wild trampling to and fro, showed that the ants had made full use of the interval, though luckily only a few had managed to get across. The men set to work again desperately with the barrage of earth and sand. Meanwhile an old Indian, who acted as medicine-man to the plantation workers, gave the bitten peon a drink he had prepared some hours before, which, he claimed, possessed the virtue of dissolving and weakening ants' venom.

Leiningen surveyed his position. A dispassionate observer would have estimated the odds against him at a thousand to one. But then such an onlooker would have reckoned only by what he saw—the advance of myriad battalions of ants against the futile efforts of a few defenders—and not by the unseen activity that can go on in a man's brain.

Here and there dark ribbons were already mounting the inner bank.

In a trice the wooden haft swarmed with upward-scurrying insects.

For the water in the ditch was beginning to rise; the stronger damming of the river was making itself apparent.

Visibly the swiftness and power of the masses of water increased, swirling into quicker and quicker movement its living black surface, dispersing its pattern, carrying away more and more of it on the hastening current.

Victory had been snatched from the very jaws of defeat. With a hysterical shout of joy, the peons feverishly intensified their bombardment of earth clods and sand.

And now the wide cataract down the opposite bank was thinning and ceasing, as if the ants were becoming aware that they could not attain their aim. They were scurrying back up the slope to safety.

All the troops so far hurled into the ditch had been sacrificed in vain. Drowned and floundering insects eddied in thousands along the flow, while Indians running on the

bank destroyed every swimmer that reached the farther side.

The news ran swiftly along the entire chain of outposts, and soon a long scattered line of laughing men could be seen hastening along the ditch towards the scene of victory.

For once they seemed to have lost all their native reserve, for it was in wild abandon now they celebrated the triumph —as if there were no longer thousands of millions of merciless, cold and hungry eyes watching them from the opposite bank, watching and waiting.

The sun sank behind the rim of the tamarind wood and twilight deepened into night. It was not only hoped but expected that the ants would remain quiet until dawn. But to defeat any forlorn attempt at a crossing, the flow of water through the ditch was powerfully increased by opening the dam still further.

In spite of this impregnable barrier, Leiningen was not yet altogether convinced that the ants would not venture another surprise attack. He ordered his men to camp along the bank overnight. He also detailed parties of them to patrol the ditch in two of his motor-cars and ceaselessly to illuminate the surface of the water with headlights and electric torches.

After having taken all the precautions he deemed necessary, the farmer ate his supper with considerable appetite and went to bed. His slumbers were in no wise disturbed by the memory of the waiting, live, twenty square miles.

Dawn found a thoroughly refreshed and active Leiningen riding along the edge of the ditch. The planter saw before him a motionless and unaltered throng of besiegers. He studied the wide belt of water between them and the plantation, and for a moment almost regretted that the fight had ended so soon and so simply. In the comforting, matter-of-fact light of morning, it seemed to him now that the ants hadn't the ghost of a chance to cross the ditch. Even if they plunged headlong into it on all three fronts at once, the force of the now powerful current would inevitably sweep them away. He had got quite a thrill out of the fight—a pity it was already over.

He rode along the eastern and southern sections of the ditch and found everything in order. He reached the western section, opposite the tamarind wood, and there, contrary to the other battlefronts, he found the enemy very busy indeed. The trunks and branches of the trees and the creepers of the lianas, on the far bank of the ditch, fairly swarmed with industrious insects. But instead of eating the leaves there and then, they were merely gnawing through the stalks, so that a thick green shower fell steadily to the ground.

No doubt they were victualling columns sent to obtain provender for the rest of the army. The discovery did not surprise Leiningen. He did not need to be told that ants are intelligent, that certain species even use others as milch cows, watchdogs and slaves. He was well aware of their power of adaptation, their sense of discipline, their marvellous talent for organization.

His belief that a foray to supply the army was in progress was strengthened when he saw the leaves that fell to the ground being dragged to the troops waiting outside the wood. Then all at once he realized the aim that rain of green was intended to serve.

Each single leaf, pulled or pushed by dozens of toiling insects, was borne straight to the edge of the ditch. Even as Macbeth watched the approach of Birnam Wood in the hands of his enemies, Leiningen saw the tamarind wood move nearer and nearer in the mandibles of the ants. Unlike the fey Scot, however, he did not lose his nerve; no witches had prophesied his doom, and if they had he would have slept just as soundly. All the same, he was forced to admit to himself that the situation was now far more ominous than that of the day before.

He had thought it impossible for the ants to build rafts for themselves—well, here they were, coming in thousands, more than enough to bridge the ditch. Leaves after leaves rustled down the slope into the water, where the current drew them away from the bank and carried them into mid-stream. And every single leaf carried several ants. This time

Each single leaf, pulled or pushed by dozens of toiling insects, was borne straight to the edge of the ditch.

the farmer did not trust to the alacrity of his messengers. He galloped away, leaning from his saddle and yelling orders as he rushed past outpost after outpost: "Bring petrol pumps to the south-west front! Issue spades to every man along the line facing the wood!" And arrived at the eastern and southern sections, he dispatched every man except the observation posts to the menaced west.

Then, as he rode past the stretch where the ants had failed to cross the day before, he witnessed a brief but impressive scene. Down the slope of the distant hill there came towards him a singular being, writhing rather than running, an animal-like blackened statue with a shapeless head and four quivering feet that knuckled under almost ceaselessly. When the creature reached the far bank of the ditch and collapsed opposite Leiningen, he recognized it as a pampas stag, covered over and over with ants.

It had strayed near the zone of the army. As usual, they

had attacked its eyes first. Blinded, it had reeled . . . straight into the ranks of its persecutors, and now the beast swayed to and fro in its death agony.

With a shot from his rifle Leiningen put it out of its misery. Then he pulled out his watch. He hadn't a second to lose, but for life itself he would not have denied his curiosity the satisfaction of knowing how long the ants would take—for personal reasons, so to speak. After six minutes the white polished bones alone remained. That's how he himself would look before you can—— Leiningen spat once, and put spurs to his horse. The zest with which the excitement of the novel contest had inspired him the day before had now vanished; in its place was a cold and violent purpose. He had underestimated the might of the enemy; he really would have to bestir himself if he hoped to outwit them.

The biggest danger now, he decided, was the point where the western section of the ditch curved southwards. And arrived there, he found his worst expectations justified. The very power of the current had huddled the leaves and their crews of ants so close together at the bend that the bridge was almost ready.

True, streams of petrol and clumps of earth still prevented a landing. But the number of floating leaves was increasing ever more swiftly. It could not be long now before a stretch of water a mile in length was decked by a green pontoon over which the ants could rush in millions.

Leiningen galloped to the weir. The damming of the river was controlled by a wheel on its bank. The planter ordered the man at the wheel first to lower the water in the ditch almost to vanishing point, next to wait a moment, then suddenly to let the river in again. This manoeuvre of lowering and raising the surface, of decreasing, then increasing, the flow of water through the ditch, was to be repeated over and over again until further notice.

This tactic was at first successful. The water in the ditch sank, and with it the film of leaves. The green fleet nearly reached the bed and the troops on the far bank swarmed

down the slope to it. Then a violent flow of water at the original depth raced through the ditch, overwhelming leaves and ants and sweeping them along.

This intermittent rapid flushing prevented just in time the almost completed fording of the ditch. But it also flung here and there squads of the enemy vanguard simultaneously up the inner bank. These seemed to know their duty only too well, and lost no time accomplishing it. The air rang with the curses of bitten Indians. They had removed their shirts and pants to detect the quicker the upwards-hastening insects; when they saw one, they crushed it; and fortunately the onslaught as yet was only by skirmishers.

Again and again the water sank and rose, carrying leaves and drowned ants away with it. It lowered once more nearly to its bed; but this time the exhausted defenders waited in vain for the flush of destruction. Leiningen sensed disaster; something must have gone wrong with the machinery of the

A violent flow of water raced through the ditch, overwhelming leaves and ants and sweeping them along.

dam. Then a sweating peon tore up to him with the news—"They're over!"

While the besieged were concentrating upon the defence of the stretch opposite the wood, the seemingly unaffected line beyond the wood had become the theatre of decisive action. Here the defenders' front was sparse and scattered; everyone who could be spared had hurried away to the south.

Just as the man at the weir had lowered the water almost to the bed of the ditch, the ants on a wide front began another attempt at a direct crossing like that of the preceding day. Into the emptied bed poured an irresistible throng. Rushing across the ditch, they attained the inner bank before the slow-witted Indians fully grasped the situation. Their frantic screams dumbfounded the man at the weir. Before he could direct the river anew into the safeguarding bed he saw himself surrounded by raging ants. He ran like the others, ran for his life.

When Leiningen heard this, he knew the plantation was doomed. He wasted no time bemoaning the inevitable. For as long as there was the slightest chance of success he had stood his ground, and now any further resistance was both useless and dangerous. He fired three revolver shots into the air—the prearranged signal for his men to retreat instantly within the 'inner moat.' Then he rode towards the ranch-house.

This was two miles from the point of invasion. There was therefore time enough to prepare the second line of defence against the advent of the ants. Of the three great petrol cisterns near the house, one had already been half emptied by the constant withdrawals needed for the pumps during the fight at the water ditch. The remaining petrol in it was now drawn off through underground pipes into the concrete trench which encircled the ranch-house and its outbuildings.

And there, drifting in twos and threes, Leiningen's men reached him. Most of them were obviously trying to preserve an air of calm and indifference, belied, however, by their restless glances and knitted brows. One could see their belief

He ran like the others, ran for his life.

in a favourable outcome of the struggle was already considerably shaken.

The planter called his peons around him.

"Well, lads," he began, "we've lost the first round. But we'll smash the beggars yet, don't you worry. Anyone who thinks otherwise can draw his pay here and now and push off. There are rafts enough and to spare on the river and plenty of time still to reach 'em."

Not a man stirred.

Leiningen acknowledged this silent vote of confidence with a laugh that was half a grunt. "That's the stuff, lads. Too bad if you'd missed the rest of the show, eh? Well, the fun won't start till morning. Once these blighters turn tail, there'll be plenty of work for everyone and higher wages all round. And now run along and get something to eat; you've earned it all right."

The bridges over the concrete ditch were removed. Herc

The planter called his peons around him.

and there solitary ants had reached the ditch; they gazed at the petrol meditatively, then scurried back again. Apparently they had little interest, at the moment, for what lay beyond the evil-reeking barrier; the abundant spoils of the plantation were the main attraction. Soon the trees, shrubs and beds for miles around were hulled with ants zealously gobbling the yield of long weary months of strenuous toil.

As twilight began to fall, a cordon of ants marched around the petrol trench, but as yet made no move towards its brink. Leiningen posted sentries with headlights and electric torches, then withdrew to his office and began to reckon up his

losses. He estimated these as large, but, in comparison with his bank balance, by no means unbearable. He worked out in some detail a scheme of intensive cultivation which would enable him, before very long, to more than compensate himself for the damage now being wrought to his crops. It was with a contented mind that he finally betook himself to bed, where he slept deeply until dawn, undisturbed by any thought that next day little more might be left of him than a glistening skeleton.

He rose with the sun and went out on the flat roof of his house. And a scene like one from Dante lay around him; for miles in every direction there was nothing but a black, glittering multitude, a multitude of rested, sated, but none the less voracious ants; yes, look as far as one might, one could see nothing but that rustling black throng, except in the north, where the great river drew a boundary they could not hope to pass. But even the high stone breakwater, along the bank of the river, which Leiningen had built as a defence against inundations, was like the paths, the shorn trees and shrubs, the ground itself, black with ants.

So their greed was not glutted in razing that vast plantation? Not by a long chalk; they were all the more eager now on a rich and certain booty—four hundred men, numerous horses, and bursting granaries.

At first it seemed that the petrol trench would serve its purpose. The besiegers sensed the peril of swimming it, and made no move to plunge blindly over its brink. Instead they devised a better manoeuvre; they began to collect shreds of bark, twigs and dried leaves and dropped these into the petrol. Everything green, which could have been similarly used, had long since been eaten. After a time, though, a long procession could be seen bringing from the west the tamarind leaves used as rafts the day before.

Since the petrol, unlike the water in the outer ditch, was perfectly still, the refuse stayed where it was thrown. It was several hours before the ants succeeded in covering an appreciable part of the surface. At length, however, the

invading forces were ready to proceed to a direct attack.

Their storm-troops swarmed down the concrete side, scrambled over the supporting surface of twigs and leaves, and impelled these over the few remaining streaks of open petrol until they reached the other side. Then they began to climb up this to make straight for the helpless garrison.

During the entire offensive the planter sat peacefully, watching them with interest, but not stirring a muscle. Moreover, he had ordered his men not to disturb in any way whatever the advancing horde. So they squatted listlessly along the bank of the ditch and waited for a sign from the boss.

The petrol was now covered with ants. A few had climbed the inner concrete wall and were scurrying towards the defenders.

"Everyone back from the ditch!" roared Leiningen. The men rushed away, without the slightest idea of his plan. He stooped forward and cautiously dropped into the ditch a stone which split the floating carpet and its living freight, to reveal a gleaming patch of petrol. A match spurted, sank down to the oily surface—Leiningen sprang back; in a flash a towering rampart of fire encompassed the garrison.

This spectacular and instant repulse threw the Indians into ecstasy. They applauded, yelled and stamped, like children at a pantomime. Had it not been for the awe in which they held the boss, they would infallibly have carried him shoulder-high.

It was some time before the petrol burned down to the bed of the ditch and the wall of smoke and flame began to lower. The ants had retreated in a wide circle from the devastation, and innumerable charred fragments along the outer bank showed that the flames had spread from the holocaust in the ditch well into the ranks beyond, where they had wrought havoc far and wide.

Yet the perseverance of the ants was by no means broken; indeed, each set-back seemed only to whet it. The concrete cooled, the flicker of the dying flames wavered and vanished,

This spectacular repulse threw the Indians into ecstasy.

petrol from the second tank poured into the trench—and the ants marched forward anew to the attack.

The foregoing scene repeated itself in every detail, except that on this occasion less time was needed to bridge the ditch, for the petrol was now already filmed by a layer of ash. Once again they withdrew; once again petrol flowed into the ditch. Would the creatures never learn that their self-sacrifice was utterly senseless? It really was senseless, wasn't it? Yes, of course it was senseless—provided the defenders had an *unlimited* supply of petrol.

When Leiningen reached this stage of reasoning he felt,

for the first time since the arrival of the ants, that his confidence was deserting him. His skin began to creep; he loosened his collar. Once the devils were over the trench there wasn't a chance in hell for him and his men. God! What a prospect, to be eaten alive like that!

For the third time the flames immolated the attacking troops and burned down to extinction. Yet the ants were coming on again as if nothing had happened. And meanwhile Leiningen had made a discovery that chilled him to the bone —petrol was no longer flowing into the ditch. Something must be blocking the outflow pipe of the third and last cistern—a snake or a dead rat? Whatever it was, the ants could be held off no longer, unless petrol could by some method be led from the cistern into the ditch.

Then Leiningen remembered that in an outhouse near-by were two old disused fire-engines. Spry as never before in their lives, the peons dragged them out of the shed, connected their pumps to the cistern, uncoiled and laid the hose. They were just in time to aim a stream of petrol at a column of ants that had already crossed and drive them back down the incline into the ditch. Once more an oily girdle surrounded the garrison, once more it was possible to hold the position—for the moment.

It was obvious, however, that this last resource meant only the postponement of defeat and death. A few of the peons fell on their knees and began to pray; others, shrieking insanely, fired their revolvers at the black, advancing masses, as if they felt their despair was pitiful enough to sway fate itself to mercy.

At length two of the men's nerves broke; Leiningen saw a naked Indian leap over the north side of the petrol trench, quickly followed by a second. They sprinted with incredible speed towards the river. But their fleetness did not save them; long before they could attain the rafts, the enemy covered their bodies from head to foot. . . .

In spite of this bloody warning, more and more men showed they were making up their minds to run the blockade.

A few of the peons fell on their knees and began to pray.

Anything, even a fight midstream against alligators, seemed better than powerlessly waiting for death to come and slowly consume their living bodies.

Leiningen flogged his brain till it reeled.

Then out of the inferno of his bewilderment rose a terrifying inspiration. Yes, one hope remained, and one alone. It might be possible to dam the great river completely, so that its waters would fill not only the water ditch but overflow into the entire gigantic 'saucer' of land in which lay the plantation.

The far bank of the river was too high for the waters to escape that way. The stone breakwater ran between the river and the plantation; its only gaps occurred where the 'horse-shoe' ends of the water ditch passed into the river. So its waters would not only be forced to inundate into the plantation, they would also be held there by the breakwater until they rose to its own high level. In half an hour, perhaps

even earlier, the plantation and its hostile army of occupation would be flooded.

The ranch-house and outbuildings stood upon rising ground. Their foundations were higher than the breakwater, so the flood would not reach them. And any remaining ants trying to ascend the slope could be repulsed by petrol.

It was possible—yes, if one could only get to the dam! A distance of nearly two miles lay between the ranch-house and the weir—two miles of ants. Those two peons had managed only a fifth of that distance at the cost of their lives. Was there an Indian daring enough, after that, to run the gauntlet five times as far? Hardly likely; and if there were, his prospect of getting back was almost nil.

No, there was only one thing for it, he'd have to make the attempt himself; he might just as well be running as sitting still, anyway, when the ants finally got him. Besides, there *was* a bit of a chance.

"Listen, lads!" he shouted. "You're frightened of those beggars, but you're a damn sight more frightened of me, and I'm proud of you. There's still a chance to save our lives—by flooding the plantation from the river. Now one of you might manage to get as far as the weir—but he'd never come back. Well, I'm not going to let you try it; if I did I'd be worse than one of those ants. No, I called the tune, and now I'm going to pay the piper.

"The moment I'm over the ditch, set fire to the petrol. That'll allow time for the flood to do the trick. Then all you have to do is to wait here all snug and quiet till I'm back. Yes, I'm coming back, trust me"—he grinned—"when I've finished my slimming cure."

He pulled on high leather boots, drew heavy gauntlets over his hands, and stuffed the spaces between breeches and boots, gauntlets and arms, shirt and neck, with rags soaked in petrol. With close-fitting mosquito goggles he shielded his eyes, knowing too well the ants' dodge of first robbing their victim of sight. Finally, he plugged his nostrils and ears with cotton-wool, and let the peons drench his clothes with petrol.

Leiningen then remembered the paralysing effect of ants' venom, and the old Indian medicine-man gave him a gourd full of the medicine he had administered to the bitten peon at the water ditch. The planter drank it down without noticing its bitter taste; his mind was already at the weir.

He started off towards the north-west corner of the trench. With a bound he was over—and among the ants.

The beleaguered garrison had no opportunity to watch

The peons drenched his clothes with petrol.

Leiningen's race against death. The ants were climbing the inner bank again—the lurid ring of petrol blazed aloft. For the fourth time that day the reflection from the fire shone on the sweating faces of the imprisoned men, and on the reddish-black cuirasses of their oppressors. The red-and-blue, dark-edged flames leaped vividly now, celebrating what? The funeral pyre of the four hundred, or of the hosts of destruction?

Then he was at the weir and gripping the ant-hulled

Leiningen ran. He ran in long equal strides, with only one thought, one sensation, in his being—he *must* get through. He dodged all trees and shrubs; except for the split seconds his soles touched the ground the ants should have no opportunity to alight on him. That they would get to him soon, despite the salve on his boots, the petrol in his clothes, he realized only too well, but he knew even more surely that he must, and that he would, get to the weir.

Apparently the salve was some use after all; not until he had reached half-way did he feel ants under his clothes, and a few on his face. Mechanically, in his stride, he struck at them, scarcely conscious of their bites. He saw he was drawing appreciably nearer the weir—the distance grew less and less—sank to five hundred—three—two—one hundred yards.

Then he was at the weir and gripping the ant-hulled wheel. Hardly had he seized it when a horde of infuriated ants flowed over his hands, arms and shoulders. He started the

wheel. . . . He turned and turned; slowly the dam lowered.

wheel—before it turned once on its axis the leaders were on his face. Leiningen strained like a madman, his lips pressed tight; if he opened them to draw breath . . .

He turned and turned; slowly the dam lowered until it reached the bed of the river. Already the water was overflowing the ditch. Another minute and the river was pouring through the near-by gap in the breakwater. The flooding of the plantation had begun.

Leiningen let go the wheel. Now, for the first time, he realized he was coated from head to foot with a layer of ants. In spite of the petrol, his clothes were full of them, several had got underneath all his clothes to his body. Now that he had completed his task he felt the smart raging over his flesh from the bites of sawing and piercing insects.

Frantic with pain, he almost plunged into the river. To be ripped and slashed to shreds by piranhas? Already he was running the return journey, knocking ants from his gloves

and jacket, brushing them from his bloodied face, squashing them to death under his clothes.

One of the creatures bit him just below the rim of his goggles; he managed to tear it away, but the agony of the bite and its etching acid drilled into the eye-nerves; he saw now through circles of fire into a milky mist, then he ran for a time almost blinded, knowing that if he once tripped and fell . . .

The old Indian's brew didn't seem much good after all; it weakened the poison a bit, but didn't get rid of it. His heart pounded as if it would burst; blood roared in his ears; a giant's fist battered his lungs.

Then he could see again, but the burning girdle of petrol appeared infinitely far away; he could not last half that distance. Swift-changing pictures flashed through his head, episodes in his life, while in another part of his brain a cool and impartial onlooker informed that ant-blurred, gasping, exhausted bundle named Leiningen that such a rushing panorama of scenes from one's past is seen only in the moment before death.

A stone in the path . . . too weak to avoid it . . . the planter stumbled and collapsed. He tried to rise . . . he must be pinned under a rock . . . it was impossible . . . the slightest movement was impossible. . . .

Then all at once he saw, starkly clear and huge, and, right before his eyes, furred with ants, towering and swaying in its death agony, the pampas stag. In six minutes—gnawed to the bones. God! He *couldn't* die like that! And something outside him seemed to drag him to his feet. He tottered. He began to stagger forward again.

Through the blazing ring hurtled an apparition which, as soon as it reached the ground on the inner side, fell full length and did not move. Leiningen, at the moment he made that leap through the flames, lost consciousness for the first time in his life.

As he lay there, prostrate, with glazing eyes and lacerated face, he appeared as a man returned from the grave.

The peons rushed to him, stripped off his clothes and tore away the ants. . . . They carried him into the ranch-house.

As the curtain of flames lowered, one could see, in place of the illimitable host of ants, an extensive vista of water. The thwarted river had swept over the plantation, carrying with it the entire army. The water had collected and mounted in the great 'saucer' while the ants had in vain attempted to reach the hill on which stood the ranch-house. The girdle of flames held them back.

And so, imprisoned between water and fire, they had been delivered into the annihilation that was their god. And near the farther mouth of the water ditch, where the stone mole had its second gap, the ocean swept the lost battalions into the river, to vanish for ever.

The ring of fire dwindled as the water mounted to the petrol trench and quenched the dimming flames. . . .

It swelled over ant-stippled shrubs and bushes, until it washed against the foot of the knoll whereon the besieged had taken refuge. For a while an alluvial of ants tried again and again to attain this dry land, only to be repulsed by streams of petrol back into the merciless flood.

Leiningen lay on his bed, his body swathed from head to foot in bandages. With fomentations and salves they had managed to stop the bleeding, and had dressed his many wounds.

Now the men thronged around him, one question in every face. Would he recover?

"He won't die," said the old man who had bandaged him, "if he doesn't want to."

The planter opened his eyes. "Everything in order?" he asked.

"They've gone," said his nurse. "To hell." He held out to his master a gourd full of a powerful sleeping draught. Leiningen gulped it down.

"I told you I'd come back," he murmured, "even if I am a bit streamlined."

He grinned and shut his eyes. He slept.

Directly he left the farmyard he began to climb.

[See page 302

T. O. BEACHCROFT

★

The erne from the coast

"WHERE'S Harry?"

Mr. Thorburn came out of the back of the farmhouse. He stood in the middle of the well-kept farmyard.

"Here, Harry," he shouted. "Hi. Harry!"

He stood leaning on a stick and holding a letter in his hand as he looked round the farmyard.

Mr. Thorburn was a red-faced, powerful man; he wore knee-breeches and black leather gaiters. His face and well-fleshed body told you at a glance that Thorburn's Farm had not done too badly during the twenty years of his married life.

Harry, a fair-haired boy, came running across the yard.

"Harry," said the farmer to his son, "here's a letter come for old Michael. It will be about this visit he's to pay to his sick brother. Nice time of year for this to happen, I must say. You'd better take the letter to him at once."

"Where to?" said Harry.

"He's up on the hill, of course," said the farmer. "In his hut, or with the sheep somewhere. Your own brains could have told you that. Can't you ever use them? Go on, now."

"Right," said Harry. He turned to go.

"Don't take all day," his father shouted.

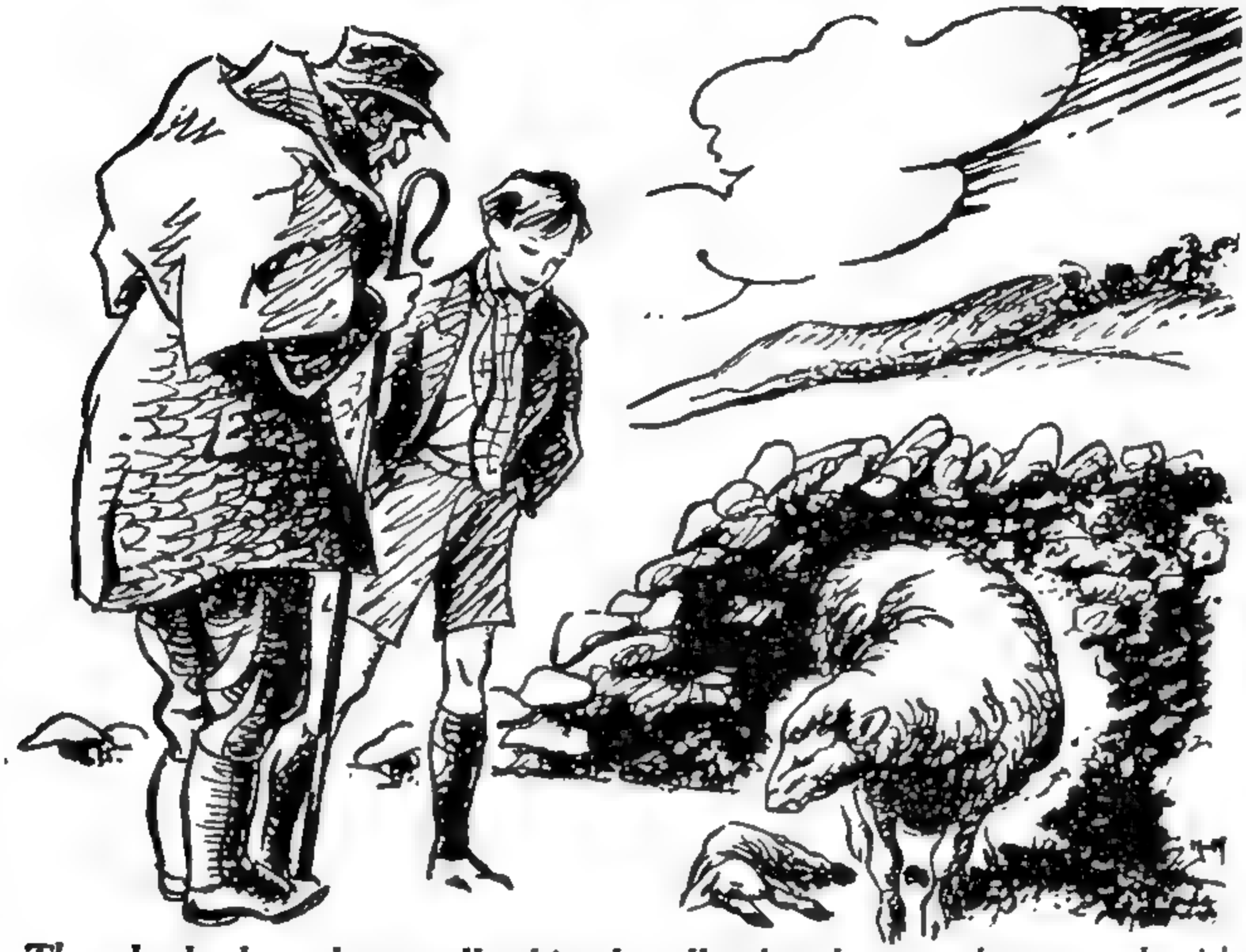
Mr. Thorburn stood looking after his son. He leant heavily on the thorn stick which he always carried. Harry went

through the gate in the low grey wall, which ran round one side of the yard, where there were no buildings. Directly he left the farmyard he began to climb. Thorburn's Farm was at the end of a valley. Green fields lay in front of it, and a wide road sloped gently down to the village a mile away; behind, the hill soared up, and high on the ridge of the hill was Michael's hut, three miles off, and climbing all the way.

Harry was thirteen, very yellow-haired and blue-eyed. He was a slip of a boy. It seemed unlikely that he could ever grow into such a stolid, heavy man as his father. Mr. Thorburn was every pound of fourteen stone, as the men on the farm could have told you the day he broke his leg and they had to carry him back to the farmhouse on a hurdle.

Harry started off far too fast, taking the lower slopes almost at a run. His body was loose in its movements, and coltish, and by the time the real work began he was already tiring. However, the April day was fresh and rainy, and the cold of it kept him going. Grey gusts and showers swept over the hill-side, and between them, with changing light, came faint gleams of sunshine, so that the shadows of the clouds raced along the hill beside him. Presently he cleared the gorse and heather and came out on to the open hill-side, which was bare except for short, tussocky grass. His home began to look far off beneath him. He could see his mother walking down towards the village with one of the dogs, and the baker's cart coming up from the village towards her. The fields were brown and green around the farmhouse, and the buildings were grey with low stone walls.

He stopped several times to look back on the small, distant farm. It took him well over an hour to reach the small hut where Michael lived by day and slept during most nights throughout the lambing season. He was not in his hut, but after a few minutes' search Harry found him. Michael was sitting without movement, watching the sheep and talking to his grey and white dog. He had a sack across his shoulders, which made him look rather like a rock with grey lichen on it. He looked up at Harry without moving.



They looked at the small white bundle that lay on the grass beside its mother, hardly moving.

"It's a hildy-wildy day," he said, "but there'll be a glent of sunsheen yet."

Harry handed Michael the letter. Michael looked at it and opened it very slowly, and spread the crackling paper out on his knee with brown hands. Harry watched him for some minutes as he studied the letter in silence.

"Letter'll be aboot my brother," said Michael at length. "I'm to goa to see him." He handed the letter to Harry. "Read it, Harry," he said. Harry read the letter to him twice.

"Tell thy dad," said Michael, "I'll be doon at farm i' the morn. Happen I'll be away three days. And tell him new lamb was born last neet, but it's sickly."

They looked at the small, white bundle that lay on the grass beside its mother, hardly moving.

"'T'll pick up," said Michael. He slowly stood and looked round at the distance.

Michael had rather long hair; it was between grey and white in colour, and it blew in the wind. It was about the hue of an old sheep's skull that has lain out on the bare mountain. Michael's clothes and face and hair made Harry feel that he had slowly faded out on the hill-side. He was all the colour of rain on the stones and last year's bracken.

"It'll make a change," said Michael, "going off and sleeping in a bed."

"Goodbye," said Harry. "You'll be down at the farm tomorrow, then?"

"Aw reet," said Michael.

"Aw reet," said Harry.

Harry went slowly back to the farm. The rain had cleared off and the evening was sunny, with a watery light, by the time he was home. Michael had been right. Harry gave his father the message and told him about the lamb.

"It's a funny thing," said Harry, "that old Michael can't even read."

"Don't you be so smart," said Mr. Thorburn. "Michael knows a thing or two you don't. You don't want to go muckering about with an old fellow like Michael—best shepherd I've ever known."

Harry went away feeling somewhat abashed. Lately it seemed his father was always down on him, telling him he showed no sign of sense; telling him he ought to grow up a bit; telling him he was more like seven than thirteen.

He went to the kitchen. This was a big, stone-floored room with a huge plain table, where the whole household and several of the farm hands could sit down to dinner or tea at the same time. His mother and his aunt from the village were still lingering over their teacups, but there was no one else in the room except a small tortoiseshell cat, which was pacing round them asking for milk in a loud voice. The yellow evening light filled the room. His mother gave him tea and ham and bread and butter, and he ate it in silence, playing with the cat as he did so.

Next morning at nine o'clock there was a loud rap with

a stick at the kitchen door, and there by the pump, with the hens running round his legs, stood Michael.

"Good morning, Mrs. Thorburn," he said. "Is Measter about?"

"Come on in with you," said Mrs. Thorburn, "and have a good hot cup o' tea. Have you eaten this morning?"

Michael clanked into the kitchen, his hobnails striking the flags, and he sat down at one end of the table.

"Aye," he said, "I've eaten, missus. I had a good thoombit when I rose up, but a cup of tea would be welcome."

As he drank the tea Mr. Thorburn came in, bringing Harry with him. Michael, thought Harry, always looked rather strange when he was down in the village or in the farmhouse; rather like a pile of bracken or an armful of leaves would look if it were emptied out on to the parlour floor.

Michael talked to Mr. Thorburn about the sheep; about the new lamb; about young Bob, his nephew, who was coming over from another farm to look after the sheep while he was away.

"Tell en to watch new lamb," said Michael, "it's creachy. I've put en in my little hut, and owd sheep is looking roun' t'dorway."

After his cup of tea Michael shook hands all round. Then he set off down to the village, where he was going to fall in with a lift.

Soon after he had gone, Bob arrived at the farm. He was a tall young man with a freckled face and red hair, big-boned and very gentle in his voice and movements. He listened to all Mr. Thorburn's instructions and then set out for the shepherd's hut.

However, it seemed that Mr. Thorburn's luck with his shepherds was dead out. For the next evening, just as it was turning dark, Bob walked into the farmhouse kitchen. His face was tense with pain, and he was nursing his left arm with his right hand. Harry saw the ugly distorted shape and swelling at the wrist. Bob had fallen and broken the wrist

Harry brewed himself some tea. He had Tassie, the grey and white sheepdog, for company.

earlier in the day, and by evening the pain had driven him back. "I'm sorry, Mr. Thorburn," he kept on saying. "Ah'm a big fule."

The sheep had to be left for that night. Next morning it was again a cold, windy day, and clouds the colour of gun-metal raced over the hill. The sun broke through fitfully, filling the valley with a steel-blue light in which the green grass looked vivid. Mr. Thorburn decided to send Harry out to the shepherd's hut for the day and night.

"Happen old Michael will be back some time tomorrow," he said. "You can look to the sheep, Harry, and see to that sick lamb for us. It's a good chance to make yourself useful."

Harry nodded.

"You can feed the lamb. Bob said it didn't seem to suck enough, and you can let me know if anything else happens.

And you can keep an eye on the other lambs and see they don't get over the edges. There's no need to fold them at night, just let the dog round them up and see the flock is near the hut."

"There's the blankets and everything in the hut, Harry," said Mrs. Thorburn, "and a spirit-lamp to make tea. You can't come to harm."

Harry set off up the hill and began to climb. Out on the hill-top it was very lonely, and the wind was loud and gusty, with sudden snatches of rain. The sheep kept near the wooden hut most of the time; it was built in the lee of the ridge and the best shelter was to be found near it. Harry looked after the sick lamb and brewed himself tea. He had Tassie, the grey and white sheepdog, for company. Time did not hang heavily. When evening came he rounded up the sheep and counted them, and, true to advice that Michael had given him, he slept in his boots as a true shepherd does, warmly wrapped up in the rugs.

He was awakened as soon as it was light by the dog barking. He went out in the grey dawn light and found a rustle and agitation among the sheep. Tassie ran to him and back towards the sheep. The sheep were starting up alert and showed a tendency to scatter. Harry looked round, wondering what the trouble was. Then he saw. A bird was hovering over the flock, and it was this that had attracted the sheep's attention. But what bird was it? It hovered like a hawk, soaring on outstretched wings; yet it was much too big for a hawk. As the bird came nearer Harry was astonished at its size. Once or twice it approached and then went soaring and floating away again. It was larger than any bird he had ever seen before—brownish in colour, with a grey head and a hawk's beak.

Suddenly the bird began to drop as a hawk drops. A knot of sheep dashed apart. Tassie rushed towards the bird, his head down and his tail streaming out behind him. Harry followed. This must be an eagle, he thought. He could see it clearly now, looking larger than ever now it was on the

Harry ran . . . he shouted. Tassie gave chase. But the eagle was working towards a chasm, a sheer drop in the hill-side where no one could follow it.

ground, standing with outstretched wings over a lamb.

Tassie attacked, snarling in rage. The eagle rose at him. It struck at him with its feet and a flurry of beating wings. The dog was thrown back. He retreated slowly, snarling savagely as he went, his tail between his legs. He was frightened now and uncertain what to do.

The eagle turned back to the lamb, took it in its talons again and began to rise. It could not move quickly near the ground, and Harry came up with it. At once the eagle put the lamb on a rock and turned on him. He saw its talons driving towards his face, claws and spurs of steel—a stroke could tear your eyes out. He put up his arms in fear, and he felt the rush of wings round his face. With his arms above his head he sank on one knee.

When he looked up again the eagle was back on the lamb. It began to fly with long, slow wing-beats. At first it scarcely rose, and flew with the lamb almost on the ground.

Harry ran, throwing a stone. He shouted. Tassie gave chase, snapping at the eagle as it went. But the eagle was working towards a chasm, a sheer drop in the hill-side where no one could follow it. In another moment it was floating in the air, clear and away. Then the eagle rose higher and headed towards the coast, which was a few miles away over the hill.

Harry stood and watched it until it was out of sight. When it was gone he turned and walked slowly back to the hut. There was not a sound to be heard now except the sudden rushes of wind. The hill-side was bare and coverless except for the scattered black rocks. Tassie walked beside him. The dog was very subdued and hardly glanced to right or left. It took some time to round the sheep up, and to find where the various parts of the flock had scattered themselves. The sick lamb and its mother had been enclosed all this time in a small fold near the hut. The ewe was still terrified.

An hour later Harry set off down the mountain-side to the farm. Tassie looked after him doubtfully. He ran several times after him, but Harry sent him back to the hut.

It was the middle of the morning when Harry came back to the farmyard again. His father was standing in the middle of the yard, leaning on his stick, and giving advice to one of his cowmen. He broke off when he saw Harry come in through the gate and walk towards him across the farmyard.

"Well," he said, "anything wrong, Harry? I thought you were going to stay till Michael came back."

"We've lost a lamb," said Harry, breathlessly. "It's been carried off by an eagle. It must have been an eagle."

"An eagle?" said Mr. Thorburn. He gave a laugh which mocked Harry. "Why didn't you stop it?"

"I tried," said Harry. "But I——"

Mr. Thorburn was in a bad mood. He had sold some heifers the day before at a disappointing price. He had had that morning a letter from the builders about repairs to some of the farm buildings, and there was work to be done which he could hardly afford. He was worried about Michael's absence. He felt as if the world was bearing down on him, and he had too many burdens to support.

He suddenly shouted at Harry, and his red face turned darker red.

"That's a lie!" he said. "There's been no eagle here in my lifetime. What's happened? Go on—tell me."

Harry stood before him. He looked at his father, but said nothing.

"You've lost that lamb," said Thorburn. "Let it fall down a hole or something. Any child from the village could have watched those sheep for a day. Then you're frightened and come back here and lie to me."

Harry still said nothing.

"Come here," said Thorburn suddenly. He caught him by the arm and turned him round. "I'll teach you not to lie to me," he said. He raised his stick and hit Harry as hard as he could; then again and again.

"Bring the eagle back and then I'll believe you."

"It's true——" began Harry, and then cried out with pain.

At the third or fourth blow he wrenched himself away. Thorburn let him go. Harry walked away as fast as he could, through the gate and out of the yard.

"Next time it will be a real beating," his father shouted after him. "Bring the eagle back, and then I'll believe you."

As soon as Harry was through the gate he turned behind one of the barns where he was out of sight from the yard. He stood trembling and clenching his fists. He found there were tears on his face, and he forced himself not to cry. The blows hurt, yet they did not hurt very seriously. He would never have cried for that. But it had been done in front of another man. The other man had looked on, and he and his father had been laughing as he had almost run away. Harry clenched his fists; even now they were still talking about him.

He began to walk and then run up the hill-side towards the hut. When he reached it he was exhausted. He flung himself on the mattress and punched it again and again and clenched his teeth.

The day passed and nobody came from the farm. He began to feel better, and presently a new idea struck him, and with it a new hope. He prayed now that old Michael would not return today; that he would be able to spend another night alone in the hut; and that the eagle would come back next morning and attack the sheep again and give him one more chance.

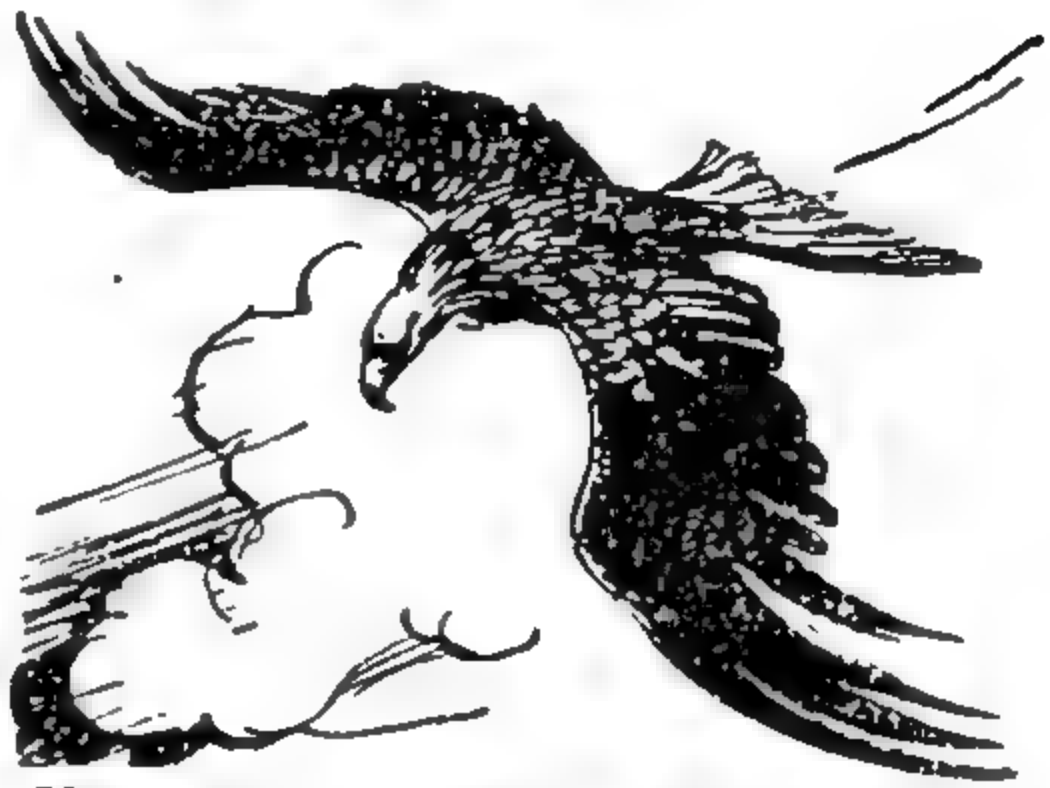
Harry went out and scanned the sky, and then knelt down on the grass and prayed for the eagle to come. Tassie, the grey and white sheepdog, looked at him questioningly. Soon it was getting dark, and he walked about the hill and rounded up the sheep. He counted the flock and all was well. Then he looked round for a weapon. There was no gun in the hut, but he found a thick stave tipped with metal, part of some broken tool that had been thrown aside. He poised the stave in his hand and swung it; it was just a good weight to hit with. He would have to go straight at the eagle without hesitation and break its skull. After thinking about this for some time he made himself tea, and ate some bread and butter and cold meat.

Down at the farm Mr. Thorburn, in the evening, told his wife what had happened. He was quite sure there had been no eagle. Mrs. Thorburn did not say much, but she said it was an extraordinary thing for Harry to have said. She told her husband that he ought not to have beaten the boy, but found out what the trouble really was.

"But I dare say there is no great harm done," she ended philosophically.

Harry spent a restless night. He slept and lay awake by turns, but, sleeping or waking, the same images thronged his mind. He saw all the events of the day before. He saw how the eagle had first appeared above him; how it had attacked; how it had driven off Tassie and then him. He

remembered his fear, and he planned again just how he could attack the eagle when it came back. Then he thought of himself going down towards the farm and he saw again the scene with his father.



He saw at once that his prayer had been answered.

All night long he saw these pictures and other scenes from his life. In every one of them he had made some mistake; he had made himself look ridiculous, and grown men had laughed at him. He had failed in strength or in common sense; he was always disappointing himself and his father. He was too young for his age. He was still a baby.

So the night passed. Early in the morning he heard Tassie barking.

He jumped up, fully clothed, and ran outside the hut. The cold air made him shiver; but he saw at once that his prayer had been answered. There was the eagle, above him, and already dropping down towards the sheep. It floated, poised on huge wings. The flock stood nervously huddled. Suddenly, as before, the attacker plunged towards them. They scattered, running in every direction. The eagle followed and swooped on one weakly running lamb. At once it tried to rise again, but once more its heavy wing-beats took it along the earth. Near the ground it seemed cumbersome and awkward. Tassie was after it like a flash; Harry seized his weapon, the stave tipped with iron, and followed.

There was the eagle above him.

With a lunging spring the eagle aimed heavily at Tassie.

When Tassie caught the eagle up it turned and faced him, standing over the lamb.

Harry, as he ran, could see blood staining the white wool of the lamb's body; the eagle's wings were half spread out over it and moving slowly. The huge bird was greyish-brown with a white head and tail. The beak was yellow and the legs yellow and scaly.

It lowered its head and with a fierce movement threatened Tassie; then, as the dog approached, it began to rock and stamp from foot to foot in a menacing dance; then it opened its beak and gave its fierce, yelping cry. Tassie hung back, his ears flattened against his head, snarling, creeping by inches towards the eagle; he was frightened, but he was brave. Then he ran in to attack.

The eagle left the lamb. With a lunging spring it aimed heavily at Tassie. It just cleared the ground and beat about Tassie with its wings, hovering over him. Tassie flattened

out his body to the earth and turned his head upwards with snapping jaws. But the eagle was over him and on him, its talons plunged into his side, and a piercing scream rang out. The eagle struck deliberately at his skull three times; the beak's point hammered on the dog's head, striking downwards and sideways. Tassie lay dead on the ground. When Harry took his eyes away from the blood, the eagle was standing on the lamb again.

Harry approached the eagle slowly, step by step. He gripped his stick firmly as he came. The eagle put its head down. It rocked on its feet as if preparing to leap. Behind the terrific beak, sharp as metal, was a shallow head, flat and broad as a snake's, glaring with light-yellow un-animal eyes. The head and neck made weaving movements towards him.

At a pace or two from the eagle Harry stood still. In a second he would make a rush. He could break the eagle's skull, he told himself, with one good blow; then he could avenge Tassie and stand up to his father.

But he waited too long. The eagle tried to rise, and with its heavy sweeping beats was beginning to gain speed along the ground. Harry ran, stumbling over the uneven ground, among the boulders and outcroppings of rock, trying to strike at the eagle as he went. But as soon as the eagle was in the air it was no longer heavy and clumsy. There was a sudden rush of wings and buffeting about his head as the eagle turned to drive him off. For a second he saw the talons, sharp as metal, backed by the metal strength of the legs, striking at his face. He put up his arm. At once it was seared with a red-hot pain.

He stepped back, and back again. The eagle, after this one fierce swoop at him, went round in a wide, low circle, and returned to the lamb. Harry saw that his coat sleeve was in ribbons, and that blood was running off the ends of his fingers and falling to the ground.

He stood panting; the wind blew across the empty high ground. The sheep had vanished from sight. Tassie lay dead near-by, and he was utterly alone on the hills. There

was nobody to watch what he did. The eagle might hurt him, but it could not jeer at him. He attacked it again, but already the eagle with its heavy wing-beats had cleared the ground; this time it took the lamb with it. Harry saw that it meant to fly, as it had flown yesterday, to an edge; and then out into the free air over the chasm and over the valley far below.

Harry gave chase, stumbling over the broken ground, and between the boulders—striking at the eagle as he went, trying to beat it down, before it could escape. The eagle was hampered by his attack; and suddenly it swooped on to a projection of rock and turned again to drive him off. Harry was now in a bad position. The eagle stood on the rock at the height of his own shoulders, with the lamb beside it. It struck at his chest with its talons, beating its wings as it did so. Harry felt clothes being torn; buffeting blows began about his head; but he kept close to the eagle and struck at it again. He did not want simply to frighten it away, but to kill it. The eagle fought at first simply to drive Harry off; then as he continued to attack it became ferocious.

Harry saw his only chance was to keep close to the eagle and beat it down; but already it was at the height of his face. It struck at him from above, driving its steel claws at him, beating its wings about him. He was dazed by the buffeting which went on and on all round him; then with an agonizing stab he felt the claws seize and pierce his shoulder and neck. He struck upwards desperately and blindly. As the eagle drove its beak at his head, his stick just turned the blow aside. The beak struck a glancing blow off the stick and tore a gash above his eyebrow.

Harry found that something was blinding him, and he felt a new sickening fear that one of his eyes was injured. The outspread beating wings and weight of the eagle dragged him about, and he nearly lost his feet. He had forgotten, now, that he was proving anything to his father; he was fighting for his eyes. Three times he fended off the hammer-stroke of the beak, and at these close quarters the blows of

He saw the talons . . . striking at his face. He put up his arm.

When they saw Harry come towards them they waited, unmoving.

his club found their mark. He caught the eagle's head each time and the bird was half stunned.

Harry, reeling and staggering, felt the grip of the claws gradually loosen, and almost unbelievably the body of his enemy sagged, half fluttering to the ground. With a sudden spurt of new strength, Harry attacked and rained blows on the bird's skull. The eagle struggled, and he followed, beating it down among the rocks. At last the eagle's movements stopped. He saw its skull was broken and it lay dead.

He stood for many minutes panting and unmoving, filled with a tremendous excitement; then he sat on a boulder. The fight had taken him near a steep edge a long way from the body of Tassie.

His wounds began to ache and burn. The sky and the horizon spun round him, but he forced himself to be firm and collected. After a while he stooped down and hoisted

the eagle on to his shoulder. The wings dropped loosely down in front and behind. He set off towards the farm.

When he reached his home, the low, grey walls, the ploughed fields and the green pasture lands were swimming before his eyes in a dizzy pattern. It was still the early part of the morning, but there was plenty of life in the farmyard as usual. Some cows were being driven out. One of the cart-horses was standing harnessed to a heavy wagon. Thorburn was talking to the carter and looking at the horse's leg.

When they saw Harry come towards them they waited, unmoving. They could hardly see at first who or what it was. Harry came up and dropped the bird at his father's feet. His coat was gone. His shirt hung in bloodstained rags about him; one arm was caked in blood; from his cut forehead the blood still oozed stickily down his cheek.

"Good God!" said Thorburn. He caught Harry by the arm as he reeled. He led him into the kitchen. There they gave him a glass of brandy and sponged him with warm water. There was a deep long wound in his left forearm. His chest was criss-crossed with cuts. The flesh was torn away from his neck where the talons had sunk in.

Presently the doctor came. The wounds began to hurt like fire, but Harry talked excitedly. He was happier than he had ever been in his life. Everybody on the farm came in to see him and to see the eagle's body.

All day his father hung about him, looking into the kitchen every half-hour. He said very little, but asked him several times how he felt. "Are you aw reet?" he kept saying. Once he took a cup of tea from his wife and carried it across the kitchen in order to give it to Harry with his own hands.

Later in the day old Michael came back, and Harry told him the whole story. Michael turned the bird over. He said it was an erne, a white-tailed sea-eagle from the coast. He measured the wing span, and it was seven and a half feet. Michael had seen two or three of them when he was a boy—always near the coast—but this one, he said, was easily the largest.

Three days later Mr. Thorburn took Harry, still stiff and bandaged, down to the village inn. There he set him before a blazing fire all the evening, and in the presence of men from every cottage and farm Thorburn praised his son, and made him tell the story of his fight to everyone.

As he told it Thorburn sat by him, hearing the story himself each time, making certain that Harry missed nothing about his struggle. Afterwards every man drank Harry's health, and clapped Thorburn on the back and told him he ought to be proud of his son.

Later in the silent darkness they walked back to the farm again, and neither of them could find anything to say. Harry wondered if his father might not refer to the beating and apologize. Thorburn moved round the house, raking out fires and locking up. Then he picked up the lamp and, holding it high, led the way upstairs.

"Good-night, Harry," said his father at last, as he took him to his bedroom door. "Are you aw reet?"

His father held the lamp up and looked into his face. As the lamplight fell on it he nodded. He said nothing more.

"Aye," said Harry, as he turned into his bedroom door, "I'm aw reet."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The publishers acknowledge with thanks permission from the Executors of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Messrs. John Murray to include "How the Brigadier won his Medal" from *The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; from the Executors of Mr. H. G. Wells and Messrs. A. P. Watt & Son to include "Through a Window" from *The Stolen Bacillus and Other Stories* by H. G. Wells; from Mr. Gerald Kersh and Messrs. William Heinemann, Ltd., to include "Irongut and the Brown Mouse" from *The Horrible Dummy and Other Stories* by Gerald Kersh; from Mr. Carl Stephenson and the Internationaal Literatuur Bureau, Hilversum, to include "Leiningen versus the Ants"; and from Mr. T. O. Beachcroft and The Bodley Head, Ltd., to include "The Erne from the Coast" from *Collected Stories* by T. O. Beachcroft.

Made and printed in Great Britain by C. Tinling & Co., Ltd., Liverpool, London and Prescot. T.465.R6.PQ.